



MARVEL STUDIOS

WandaVision



Original Series Streaming Jan. 15

BYE BYE 2020! BIG REVIEW OF THE YEAR

AARON SORKIN WRITES FOR EMPIRE • TILDA SWINTON INTERVIEWS BONG JOON-HO • FIVE HORROR DIRECTORS ON THE YEAR FROM HELL

FEBRUARY
2021

EMPIRE

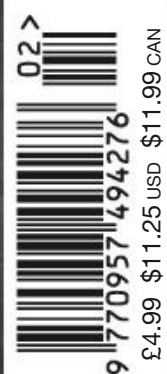


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WISE GUYS
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STAR WARS REBORN

A deep dive into **THE MANDALORIAN** (AND WE MEAN DEEP!)

+ AHSOKA TANO! DARTH VADER! PATTY JENKINS!
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2020

RIGHT, THAT'S 2020 officially done, right? The year that most of us have longed for the end of is now in the rearview mirror, disappearing out of view. I wrote in this very magazine last month of my belief that 2020 will, in spite of everything, be remembered as a good, maybe even *great*, year for film. This issue we tested that theory further by compiling our annual review of the last 12 months. Any year that ends with Tilda Swinton interviewing Bong Joon-ho (p90), Aaron Sorkin writing an essay for us (p82) and five electrifying horror directors jumping on Zoom together (p84) is a damn good one, in my book. It was a year that also brought us the second season of *The Mandalorian*, the show that made everyone (including us) fall head over heels for *Star Wars* again. And we're taking those vibes into 2021 with us as we look to the future of the franchise (Ahsoka! Vader! Patty Jenkins on those rollerblades!). Disney didn't just reveal an exciting future for the *Star Wars* universe, though: in a late-night presentation (1am GMT) that had the entire *Empire* team screaming in our WhatsApp group, they outlined what lay ahead for Marvel and Pixar too. We dig into what it means and how we feel about it all on p8.

There's so much more in the issue (Scorsese interview? Check! Francis Ford Coppola interview? Check!), but I'll let you discover the rest yourself. For the future is right there, in front of you. Step into it and don't look back. There's so much yet to come.

See you next month.



Terri

TERRI WHITE
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
@terri_white

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This month's exclusive subscriber cover
by Sam Gibbey

**TURN TO PAGE 46 FOR DETAILS ON
HOW TO SUBSCRIBE**

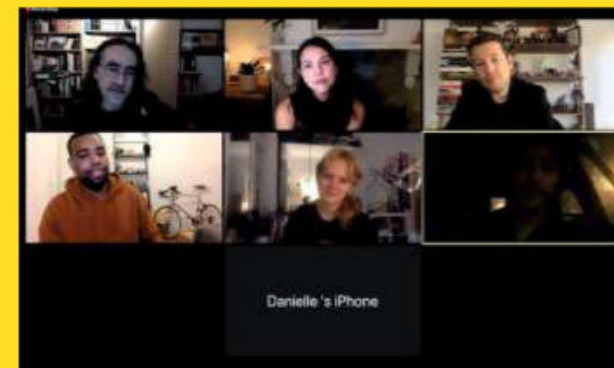
Marco Vittur. Newsstand cover by Paul Shipper

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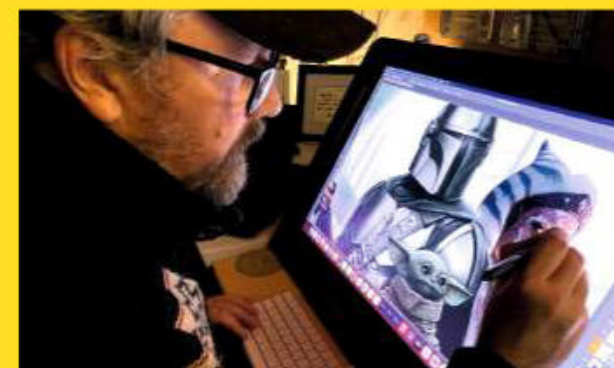
WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO THIS MONTH

THE ULTIMATE ZOOM HORROR



For *Empire*'s big review of the year, we gathered together five scary-movie directors on a video call to talk the ultimate horror story: 2020! That and their spectacular films. Read their conversation on page 84

PAUL SHIPPER VS THE EMPIRE COVER



This month's newsstand cover is illustrated by *Empire* Contributing Editor Paul Shipper — whose weapon of choice is luckily nothing more dangerous than a drawing stylus, and who thankfully doesn't demand payment in Beskar steel.

PILOT COUNTS DOWN THE TOP 20 TV SHOWS OF 2020



James, Terri and Boyd take a deep dive into the best telly of 2020 in the Review Of The Year Pilot TV pod — talking *The Boys*, *The Crown*, Michaela Coel's incredible *I May Destroy You*, and plenty more. Listen now on all good podcast providers!

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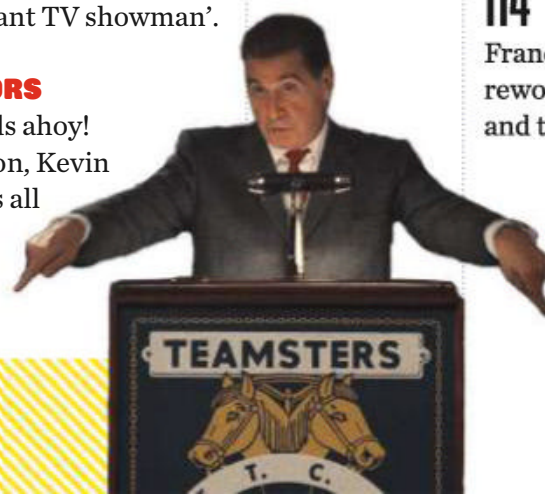
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No *Zardoz*? Shocking. Positively shocking.



Spine lines issue 338: Newsstand: "Chester! Jesse! Wanda! Wilma!" is from *Dude, Where's My Car?*. Subs: "Let me tell you my vision. The Box in every home in America... and one day, the world!" is from *Batman Forever*. Sean Connery: "I always think of Sean Connery. Seriously" is from *Lost In Translation*.

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TALK TO US



COMMENT OF THE MONTH

SPOILED FOR CHOICE

Looked for a film I remember watching a lot in my teens the other day, *Blink* (1994). Was available online on DVD for £30. Which got me thinking. Growing up, access to films was reduced to a couple of channels and a smoky video store. And the occasional trip to the cinema. Nowadays, it's on tap. And each film is no doubt, in terms of technically, acting and storylines, better than *Blink*.

RYAN GASCOYNE, VIA EMAIL

Ryan, there are Empire writers old enough to remember the pre-VHS days, when the only time you saw a film was in the cinema, and never again! Have a Picturehouse membership, so you can still appreciate the big-screen experience.

Picturehouse

Empire's star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, plus one for a friend! Valid for one year at Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, each membership comes pre-loaded with four free tickets, and gives you priority booking and exclusive discounts. Of course, Picturehouse cinemas are currently closed, but passes will be sent out when they reopen and be valid for 12 months. When you write to us, please include your full contact details so we can arrange delivery of your prize.

THE BEAR NECESSITIES

After reading the piece on *Grizzly 2*, I immediately put it on my list of films to watch for 2021. If it's as bad as the crew and production staff seem to think it was, then all the better. Perhaps if Werner Herzog had been the director it would now be a cult classic. It also launched the career of Charlie Sheen, who it turns out was much scarier than any flesh-eating bear.

EOIN MURPHY, COUNTY CORK

As Herzog might have put it: "What haunts me is that, in that face of Charlie Sheen, I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature."



AFTER LISTENING TO EP #442 OF THE *EMPIRE* MAGAZINE PODCAST I WANTED TO SEE IF I COULD FIND THE FIRST ISSUE I EVER BOUGHT. I DID, AND NOW I FEEL REALLY FUCKING OLD. BUT ALSO, NO REGRETS. LOVE YOU, *EMPIRE*!

@MSDAFOE



ON *INDIANA JONES 5*: THERE ARE ONLY THREE INDIANA JONES FILMS: *RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK*, *TEMPLE OF DOOM* AND *LAST CRUSADE*. THAT IS ALL.

DAN HAMPTON

ZAR-DOS AND ZAR-DON'TS

I was absolutely delighted to see your article on *Zardoz*. I wrote my student thesis about the film when I was at Bournemouth College of Art. What really made my day was the tone of the article — *Zardoz* is wacky as hell, but it's also extraordinarily innovative, visually striking and thought-provoking.

ROGER MICHELL, BREAM

META-LETTER

Your letters feature needs to be done away with, as does rewarding all the sycophants with their cringeworthy arse-licking with cinema memberships. Pathetic.

MARK BURTON, VIA EMAIL

Appreciate your honesty, Mark. Hopefully, by including your correspondence, the standard has been adequately raised?

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"Did your heart fall out of your arsehole one day and disappear?"



THE MANDALORIAN SPECIAL

THE ULTIMATE BREAKDOWN OF SEASON 2

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TAKES

THIS MONTH'S FILM MOMENTS THAT MATTER [EDITED BY JOHN NUGENT]



No./ 1

Disney's biggest bombshells, digested

From Marvel to Pixar, we distil down the metric tonne of chest-tightening news just revealed by Disney



WE WERE EXCITED!

Disney were not shy about revealing new footage at their Investor's Day presentation on 10 December; it's not every day you get *four* shiny new Marvel trailers in one go. The first *Loki* trailer gave us lots of tantalising glimpses of what Tom Hiddleston's God Of Mischief will be up to in a show Kevin Feige called a "crime thriller". Most intriguingly of all, the end of the teaser sees Loki returning to Asgard via Bifrost: who — or what — will await him upon his return? *WandaVision*'s second trailer looked appropriately wild, too; in contrast, *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier* promises to be a much more grounded show, focusing on Steve Rogers' BFFs, Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan) and Sam Wilson (Anthony Mackie). Cap's bequeathed shield was barely seen in the first trailer —

though we do get an exciting look at Falcon's new missile-dodging wings. Plus, the first look at the MCU's first animation *What If...?* offered up Doctor Strange vs Doctor Strange, Peggy Carter as Captain Britain and Zombie Cap, laying bear the endless possibilities for this series.

Much of that was stuff which we already knew about. But Feige also had new reveals. That included the news that Jon Watts will be entrusted with introducing the Fantastic Four to the MCU. The *Spider-Man: Homecoming* and *Far From Home* director has proven to be a safe pair of hands, and after three less-than-Fantastic false starts at other studios, that's exactly what Marvel's first family needs right now. It could even be the way in which the X-Men — notable by their absence in the announcements — enter the MCU fold.

Left: The future's bright: a glittering array of new content was unveiled at Disney's Investor Day 2020.

Elsewhere, it was finally confirmed that Tatiana Maslany will be playing Jennifer Walters, aka She-Hulk; equally excitingly, Mark Ruffalo is confirmed to reprise his role as Bruce Banner, and they'll be joined by *The Incredible Hulk*'s Tim Roth as Abomination. That line-up suggests that this show won't skimp on the Hulk-smashes.

Then there's Kamala Khan, aka Ms Marvel — a staggeringly popular comic character. That popularity can only grow with her live-action Disney+ show, which will see newcomer Iman Vellani playing the shape-shifting Pakistani-American superhero. Significantly, Ms Marvel — whose idol is Captain Marvel — is confirmed to appear in *Captain Marvel 2*, the first major TV character to make the crossover onto the big screen for the MCU. In the same breath, *Candyman* director Nia DaCosta was also confirmed to be taking the reins on *Captain Marvel 2*.

Away from the MCU, Disney gave us much to be hyped about. After unconfirmed reports earlier this year, *Indiana Jones* will be back in 2022, with the steady hand of director James Mangold, while 1980s classic *Willow* is returning as a TV series with Warwick Davis on board. And the *Alien* franchise, thought to be dead or dormant on the big screen, will continue on TV, with *Fargo* showrunner Noah Hawley at the helm, and Ridley Scott in talks to executive produce.

And then there was *Iwájú*. Billed as a first-of-its-kind collaboration between Disney and pan-African entertainment company Kugali, the Disney+ series from Fikayo Adeola, Hamid Ibrahim and Tolu Olowofoyeku will showcase African culture in a major way. Giving a platform to these fresh voices will lead to art that looks, sounds and feels different to any animated Disney project to come before it. **AMON WARMANN**

WE WERE SURPRISED!

If Disney chairman Bob Iger had revealed himself to be a Skrull during the Investor Day announcements, it would have been only marginally more shocking than some of the bombshells dropped. Honestly: *Ch-ch-ch-chip And Dale: Rescue Rangers* getting rebooted? With Andy Samberg and John Mulaney? Where the furry-frick did *that* come from!?

Of course, we are talking pleasant surprises here. Like the news that apparent one-off *Enchanted* is a one-off no longer, with Amy Adams gamely returning to subvert Disney princessness once-upon-a-time more in the sequel *Disenchanted*. Or, sticking with the princess theme, that Tiana, from the criminally underappreciated *The Princess And The Frog*, will get her own TV series charting her royal rise in the land of Maldonia; a bit like *The Crown*, we guess, but with songs and tadpoles. ➤



Left, top to bottom: A Buzz Lightyear origin story, *Lightyear*, is on its way; Amy Adams will return for a sequel to *Enchanted*; Forthcoming Pixar movie *Turning Red*.

Then there's Marvel. Kevin Feige confirmed that they will not recast T'Challa following the tragic death of Chadwick Boseman; *Black Panther II*, remarkably, will still arrive in 2022. Elsewhere, Tony Stark's legacy rumbles on with two ironclad Disney+ spin-offs: first, *Armour Wars*, which draws from the late-'80s comic-book arc, in which Stark-tech starts fuelling supervillainy on a vast scale — now with Don Cheadle's Rhodey, aka War Machine, dealing with the cybermess. Then, even more intriguingly, there's the probably-connected *Ironheart*, in which young tech genius Riri Williams designs her own 'Iron Man' suit; the casting of Dominique Thorne (*If Beale Street Could Talk*) is a sure sign of quality.

Also joining the MCU is Xochitl Gomez, announced as a surprise super-addition to the line-up for *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness*. She's bagged the role of America Chavez, the Latin American, LGBTQ, modern-age hero whose ability to kick holes in reality suggests she'll have a pretty pivotal role to play in the Sam Raimi-helmed universe-blender.

Finally, there's the biggest, most pleasant surprise of all. And, yes, it involves Skrulls. An on-screen version of its mega *Secret Invasion* storyline, with Samuel L. Jackson's Nick Fury, is an *Avengers*-level event for Disney+: set to pull in threads from all over the place, possibly even flipping the script on previous MCU movie adventures, as Fury and the soda-slurping Talos (Ben Mendelsohn) contend with a massive, undercover infiltration of planet Earth, potentially discovering some characters might not have been who we thought they were. How does that blockbuster-trailer cliché go? Oh yes: forget everything you think you know... **DAN JOLIN**

WE WERE SAD!

Given the sheer deluge of Disney announcements, it seems churlish to lament what was lacking. But among the influx of upcoming *Star Wars* announcements, there was disappointingly no mention of Rian Johnson's long-gestating cinematic *Star Wars* trilogy. While *The Last Jedi* remains a somewhat



contentious chapter of the Skywalker Saga, it increasingly holds up as a highlight of the Disney-Star Wars era. It would be fascinating to see what Johnson could cook up in his own corner of the galaxy far, far away — hopefully his trilogy, announced three years ago, isn't consigned to the Sarlacc pit yet.

Elsewhere, Kevin Feige talked up Marvel's *Moon Knight* series without confirming who will actually play Moon Knight; early word has it that Oscar Isaac is in talks to take on the role of the billionaire crimefighter, but despite other cast confirmed, Isaac's name was not mentioned. Fingers crossed he's locked in for the part soon.

Perhaps most worrying was the lack of talk around Fox Searchlight — the indie-ish arm of Fox that Disney acquired alongside all that major IP — except to say that it will develop content for US streaming service Hulu. Here's hoping the **Mouse House won't entirely consign Searchlight's character dramas to digital releases** — films like *Nomadland* and Wes Anderson's *The French Dispatch* aren't explosion-heavy, but they deserve the big screen.

And, despite some fascinating Pixar news, the whole event was a largely franchise-driven affair.



This was, to be fair, a night all about investors being clued-in on lucrative commercial prospects; there could be even more content we don't know about. **BEN TRAVIS**

WE WERE CONFUSED!

Perhaps it was the fact that we stayed up until 1.30am to hear quarterly earnings reports, but these announcements left us with some pretty puzzling questions. Chief among them: what the hell is the *Guardians Of The Galaxy Holiday Special*? James Gunn is writing and directing this spin-off, to arrive on Disney+ ahead of the full

cinematic Vol. 3 sequel. But what is it? Is Drax going to sing carols? Is Groot going to learn the true meaning of Christmas? Will there be a space-Santa? "I can't believe we're actually doing this," Gunn said on Twitter.

Then there was Pixar, revealing the next film in the *Toy Story* franchise wouldn't actually have any toys. New film *Lightyear* is pitched as Buzz Lightyear's origin story, with Chris Evans voicing Buzz. "Just to be clear," said Evans on Twitter, somehow being less clear, "this isn't Buzz Lightyear the toy. This is the origin story of the human Buzz Lightyear that the toy is based on." But wait — Buzz Lightyear is a *human* now? Not a child's plaything? What is going on?

More bonkers yet was Pixar's upcoming original film, *Turning Red*, a story of an ordinary 13-year-old girl who, whenever she gets too excited, "uncontrollably poofs into a giant red panda", according to Pixar's Pete Docter. A premise of Monkey Tennis proportions, to be sure, but in the hands of director Domee Shi (who won an Oscar for her heartwarmingly murderous short *Bao*), there are still reasons to be optimistic.

Beyond the big-hitter announcements, many of Disney+'s commissions remained pleasingly blindfold-and-a-dart-esque. A *Turner And Hooch* reboot? Sure! *Three Men And A Baby*, but with Zac Efron? Why not? A documentary series with Will Smith called *Welcome To Earth*? OK! (Will there be more shows based

on Smith's past movie catchphrases? 'NYPD: Knock Your Punkass Down', coming to Disney+ in 2022.)

Most baffling of all, though? The third Ant-Man film is called Ant-Man And The Wasp: Quantumania. What is 'Quantumania'? Say it enough and it makes less sense.

'Quantumania'. Perhaps it describes the state your mind goes in when you try to understand the word 'Quantumania'. 'Quantumania'? 'Quantumania'. JOHN NUGENT

No./2

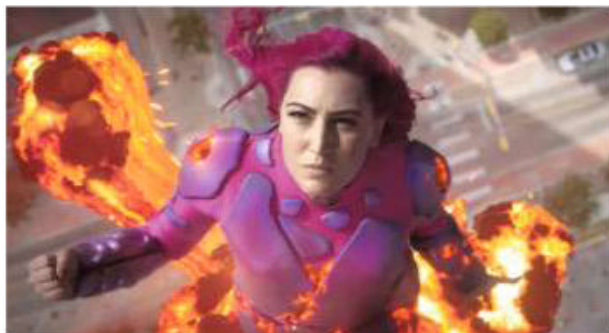
Inside Robert Rodriguez's hero factory

How the gonzo filmmaker mentors new talent and icons — on and off screen

ROBERT RODRIGUEZ LIKES to keep it in the family. In 2005, his son Racer, then seven, had a 'Story By' credit on *The Adventures Of Sharkboy And Lava Girl*. Today, Rodriguez returns to the kids' superhero genre with standalone sequel *We Can Be Heroes*; the grown-up Racer is now a producer, while his siblings have credits in set design, composing and editing. "*Sharkboy* captured a specific time in their lives and they want to pass that on," the director tells *Empire* of his filmmaking progeny. "It felt like we were mentoring the next generation, like in the movie."

Rodriguez's mentorship extended beyond his own family: the young cast, playing the tween team named 'The Heroics', were asked to be part of the creative process. "We'd have drawing sessions so we were primed to be super creative, and a lot of the best things in the movie were made up on the day," Rodriguez says. "They came in knowing all their lines and with all kinds of ideas."

The filmmaker has been redefining cinematic heroes for decades now, with *Spy Kids*, *Planet*



Top to bottom: Director Robert Rodriguez on the set of *We Can Be Heroes*; Boyd Holbrook as Miracle Guy; Taylor Dooley as Lava Girl; Vivien Blair as Guppy.

Terror and *Alita: Battle Angel* proving to be rousing cries for on-screen Latin representation. His latest is no different: Pedro Pascal plays retired hero Marcus Moreno, and newcomer YaYa Gosselin his daughter Missy. "With *Spy Kids*, it was overwhelming for Latin kids who had never seen themselves as heroes and I saw how powerful that was," he says. "It was a great opportunity to be organically diverse [here]."

The heroes-in-training line-up is inclusive in other ways, too: it includes a super strong, tech-savvy kid in a wheelchair called Wheels (Andy Walken). "You want children to model themselves on those who are pushing towards making the world better," Rodriguez says.

And there are plenty more where that came from. "My kids and I had come up with 15 kid characters we had to pare back and save for the sequel," the director says. "So we're excited to keep the Rodriguez-verse going." **HANNA FLINT**

WE CAN BE HEROES IS ON NETFLIX FROM 1 JANUARY

[TREND REPORT]

No./3

HORRIFIC BODY SWAPS

Anatomical exchanges used to be charming and cute — now they're deeply messed-up

WORDS JOHN NUGENT
ILLUSTRATIONS BILL MCCONKEY



BARNEY/MILLIE FREAKY

What if a teenage girl swapped bodies with a murderer? That's the devilishly entertaining premise served up by *Freaky*, which sees brutal kills, and Vince Vaughn twerking. *Freaky Friday*, this ain't!



TASYA/COLIN POSSESSOR

Even the Cronenbergs have got in on the R-rated body-swap craze. In Brandon Cronenberg's thriller, it's Andrea Riseborough who possesses the minds of unwitting victims, in order to carry out assassinations. *13 Going On 30*, this ain't!



EDDIE/VENOM VENOM 2: LET THERE BE CARNAGE

Venom returns next year, with Eddie Brock (Tom Hardy) and the symbiote swapping bodies — now joined by Woody Harrelson's Carnage. That one episode of *Star Trek: Voyager*, this ain't!

No./3

Inside the big WB drama of 2020

How the studio broke the internet with the plan to release all of its 2021 films simultaneously in cinemas and on streaming

AND THERE WAS us thinking *Godzilla Vs. Kong* would be cinema's bloodiest battle in 2021. In early December, Warner Bros. shocked the film world by announcing that all of its upcoming blockbusters — a slate that includes *The Matrix 4* and *Dune*, as well as the King of the Monsters' impending showdown with Skull Island's resident über-ape — would be released simultaneously in cinemas and on US streaming service HBO Max. The resulting drama was enough to make Kong himself blush. AMC, the US cinema chain which owns Odeon, confirmed, "We have already commenced an immediate and urgent dialogue with the leadership of Warner."

Reports surfaced that many of those involved in the movies heading to HBO Max were given little advance warning, with *The New York Times* claiming major agencies and talent management companies were given roughly 90 minutes' notice of the move before it was announced publicly.

Those reports were followed swiftly by those of upset A-listers: namely film stars and directors who had expected their films to play in cinemas. Enter Christopher Nolan: and while the *Tenet* director's movies may be thrillingly riddlesome, there was nothing ambiguous about the statement he issued within days of the announcement. "Some of our industry's biggest filmmakers and most important movie stars went to bed the night before thinking they were working for the greatest movie studio and woke up to find out they were working for the worst streaming service," it read. "Warner Bros. had an incredible machine for getting a filmmaker's work out everywhere, both in theaters and in the home, and they are dismantling it as we speak." Warner's move is an "evolution of something we've been seeing happen since long before the pandemic," says Delphine Lievens, senior box office analyst at Gower Street Analytics. "Even before the pandemic, there's been this gradual experimentation with the theatrical window.

Then when the pandemic struck, Universal put *Fantasy Island*, *The Hunt*, *Emma* and films like that out to rent early and Disney put *Mulan* straight to Disney+. Warner aren't the first to make this kind of move: what's generated so much noise is the fact they're saying this is the plan for the whole of 2021. For Warner Bros., the move's a way of beginning to recoup the huge amounts of money spent producing these movies, Lievens explains. "They've clearly gone: 'Well, we need to start releasing these films at some point.'"

Among all the uncertainty and fallout, there's been little clarity on what it all means for UK audiences, where HBO Max is unlikely to be launching any time soon (in 2019, the US network extended their long-term deal with Sky for the exclusive broadcast rights to all HBO content). Will movies like *The Suicide Squad* and *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It* be available exclusively in British cinemas? Or will Warner make titles available to rent on Sky Store around the same time as their theatrical release, as rumoured? And if it's the latter, will UK cinemas be able to survive without so many of the blockbusters they were depending on as they bid to recover from a disastrous 2020, in which attendance was down 75 per cent?

UK cinemas, unfortunately, don't yet have these answers. "It feels like we're trying to drive a car in the dark with no headlights," an exec at a UK cinema chain tells *Empire*. "In the US, there's talk of cinemas boycotting movies that aren't honouring the exclusive theatrical window. Whether that's just a bargaining chip and something chains will seriously pursue, I don't know. Can cinemas really afford not to show *The Matrix 4* — even with a giant chunk of fans of that movie opting to watch it at home?"

There were signs that Warner Bros. might be planning such a move: in November, it was announced that *Wonder Woman 1984* would be released on HBO Max at the same time as in

Heading to a small screen near you? Warner Bros.' beloved characters face an uncertain theatrical future.



ILLUSTRATION BILL McCONKEY

cinemas. It was the fact that Warner Bros. were committing an entire year's worth of movies to the streaming platform that surprised cinemas. "It blindsided our entire industry. No-one has been able to answer our questions about where this leaves UK cinemas, and all our customers who want to see *The Suicide Squad* on a giant screen," says the cinema worker. "[And] why, a week before we get a vaccine, are decisions being made that keep movies out of cinemas a year from now?"

Vaccinations in the UK will initially only be rolled out to the most vulnerable, with social-distancing measures likely to pose challenges to cinemas until the full population has received the jab (a process that could take over a year). Their point is that with a large percentage of Britain expected to be vaccinated by next winter, committing late 2021 releases like *The Matrix 4* and *Dune* to streaming feels premature. Some industry figures, however, have suggested the move has as much to do with bolstering HBO Max as protecting public health. "Warner are nurturing a new product in HBO Max," Lievens says of the streaming service, which launched Stateside in May but had accrued

CLOSED

TAKE 20



only 12.7 million active users by October. (Disney+, by comparison, signed up ten million subscribers in its first day.) “This [move] is only going to benefit it. If they can drive revenue to another part of the business, especially one that’s underperforming, that’s what they’ll want to do.”

“We’re living in unprecedented times which call for creative solutions,” WarnerMedia CEO Ann Sarnoff said when Warner’s announcement was made, emphasising that “no-one wants films back on the big screen more than we do.” Lievens points out that Warner could have chosen to stream these movies exclusively on HBO Max as Disney did with *Mulan* and Disney+, a move that would have been “far more detrimental to the cinema industry”. Key Warner filmmakers, including *Wonder Woman 1984*’s Patty Jenkins, have been keen to emphasise the move as one made out of Covid-induced necessity, rather than desire to disrupt the theatrical model permanently (“I never thought I’d [take] streaming over theatrical and I’m going to go back to my old ways down the road. But this is a special year,” she told *io9*).

Many worry, though, that the decision will set a precedent that will be difficult to row back

from, leaving cinemas with few exclusive movies in 2021. “All eyes are now on Fox [now owned by Disney], Sony and Paramount, basically,” says Lievens. How they respond is likely to be influenced by what happens in future deals between Warners and the stars and filmmakers behind the films losing their theatrical exclusivity. According to *The Hollywood Reporter*, Warner Bros. ‘compensated’ Gal Gadot for lost profit share in *Wonder Woman 1984*’s cinema release. The result is rumours of stars and directors’ agents now demanding similar packages from the studio, which won’t come cheap.

Where does this leave the UK, though? “HBO Max is only available in the US,” says a Warner Bros. pictures spokesperson in a statement to *Empire*. “Our plan is for all Warner Bros. films to launch theatrically in the UK and Ireland, along with other worldwide territories.” But, says Lievens, that doesn’t necessarily mean business as usual for us, given continuing Covid restrictions. “I very much doubt we’re going to see a normal release pattern in the UK, especially given we have this tiered system now. If that’s kept up into the new year, there’ll be large chunks of the country where

cinemas can’t open. My guess is that it’ll either be on Sky Cinema earlier than it’d normally be, after four to eight weeks, or it’ll be on Sky Store a week or so after [theatrical release]. They’ll want to make things as available as possible to maximise income.”

One thing’s for sure — at home and abroad, the implications of the HBO Max deal could be seismic, changing not just how films are seen, but what the future of films looks like.

“Blockbusters with big budgets came about under the old model of studios feeling they need to entice people out of their homes and into cinemas with unmissable spectacles,” says Lievens. “Under the sort of model [the HBO Max deal] might lead us towards, a film like [romcom] *Happiest Season*, that wouldn’t have been a big cinema draw, all of a sudden has as much worth as an expensive superhero movie to a studio.” In other words, if other studios follow Warner’s suit, we may see fewer blockbusters and more mid-level movies. But that’s getting ahead of ourselves. In the meantime, there are still plenty of punches to be landed in the fight over HBO Max. And overall, the thing we’re all fighting for: a bright future for film. **AL HORNER**

No. 5

Meet the robots of the (not too distant) future

How the first-time filmmaker behind new sci-fi **ARCHIVE** created three robots from scratch

THERE ARE THREE robots in new indie sci-fi *Archive*. Set in 2038, it sees engineer George (played by Theo James) work alone in his Japanese lab as he desperately attempts to recreate his late wife through artificial intelligence. Debut director Gavin Rothery, who previously collaborated with his friend Duncan Jones, says he wanted to expand on his work as concept designer on cult 2009 sci-fi *Moon*. “I wanted to do my own visual evolution from GERTY [the AI assistant in the film],” he says.

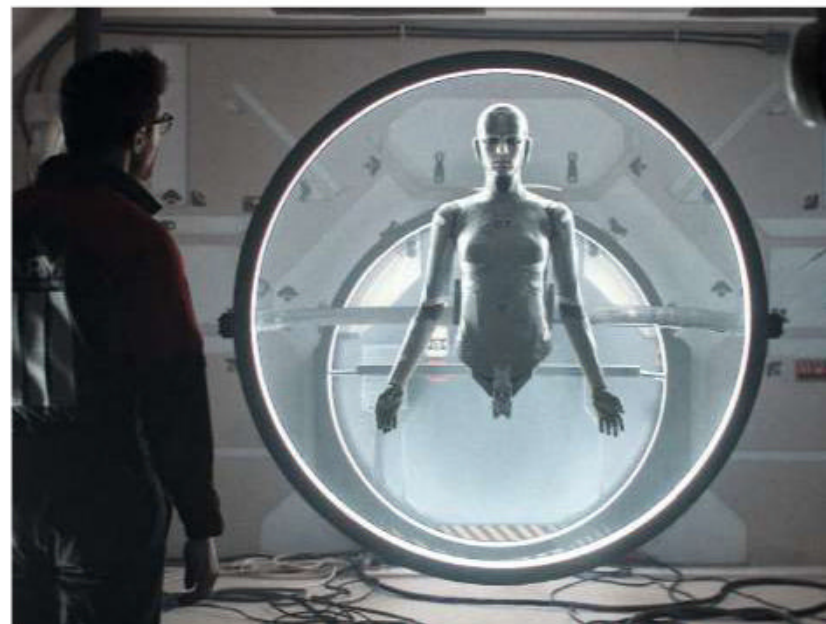
THE PROTOTYPE: J1

George’s first robot, J1, is a big, chunky thing. The design, Rothery explains, comes from the character and his obsessions. “I was always keen that J1 looked quite primitive,” Rothery says. “The idea is that George is only concentrating on the brains. He’s not really bothered about the bodies. So he doesn’t bother finishing J1. As soon as he’s got what he needs for the development of the robotic brain, he just gets onto the next one. Wherever possible, Rothery was keen to use practical effects over CGI – partly due to the film’s modest budget, and partly due to Rothery’s love of past cinematic droids. “It’s always the

robots with performers inside that I really love. Look at the personalities of R2-D2 and C-3PO! I haven’t seen a CG robot that made me *feel* like that.” J1’s primitive plodding was performed by Chris Schubert, the art director of the robot build team, who would watch an iPad inside the suit, connected to a camera, in order to see.

THE UPGRADE: J2

If J1 is the nonverbal infant child, J2 is the stropky teenager— whose more developed AI leads her to jealousy when a more advanced version is built. “When I wrote the first pass of the script, I wrote them as little girls instead of robots: a widower dad, with two young girls, and a new stepmom coming into the house. That was kind of the frame, the hook that I put around it.” Both J1 and J2 were built by a team utilising “three filament-based 3D printers running 24/7”. Made of plastic and fibreglass, Rothery pays tribute to J2’s performer, ex-Cirque Du Soleil dancer Timea Maday Kinga, for her commitment. “Every time I talk to her now, I always begin with a big apology. It’s hard to wear that suit. It was super-restrictive to move in it. Everything was held together with cable ties.”



No./6

THE COMFORT ZONE

THE SHOP AROUND THE CORNER

Alfred and Clara's long-awaited smooch continues our lockdown celebration of the best comfort movies



Top: James Stewart and Margaret Sullavan as Alfred and Clara. Above: No Tinder for these two, they used ye olde pen and paper to get together.

WHY DO SO few movies end in a kiss these days? We're not short of meet-cutes, but a lot of contemporary screen romances care more about what happens *after* the first kiss, the butterflies-in-your-stomach moment soon sidestepped in favour of a study of the mechanics of a relationship. Ernst Lubitsch's glorious 1940 movie, *The Shop Around The Corner*, doesn't do this. It's a perfect feelgood love story because it knows exactly how to end.

Alfred Kralik (James Stewart) and Clara Novak (Margaret Sullavan) are two shop clerks at Matuschek and Company, a leather-goods store in Budapest. They are spending the Christmas season each writing love letters to a mysterious pen pal — and they, of course, don't realise they are writing to each other. Kralik is the first to catch on — and the young Stewart relishes the crossed wires with boyish charm, as Clara keeps holding out for the man she's *convinced* is better than Mr Kralik. But, considering the film is only 99 minutes long, we spend more time cheering them on than scratching our heads or wondering what's going on.

The effortless charm of *The Shop Around The Corner* lies in the fact that everything you want to happen *does* happen — and there's really not much of a fuss about it. Alfred and Clara's love is earned and deserved, but ending the film with a kiss gives the viewer exactly

enough satisfaction and glee about this glorious romance, without having to worry about what comes after. It doesn't matter if they end up bickering, if they make each other nervous or eventually start writing someone else letters: for now, the kiss is the endgame. It feels safe.

The most comforting thing about this will-they-won't-they is that, well, they *will*. We've lived through so many unprecedented things this year, that sometimes to have the reassurance of a kiss as a parting gesture, to know that it doesn't matter what happens after the credits roll (and these credits, as is standard for 1940, only last 15 seconds or so) is just what we need. Plus, in our touch-starved reality of 2020, it's a wishful reminder that romance still exists, just around the corner. **ELLA KEMP**



Clockwise from left: Advanced robot J3 carries the memories of the inventor's dead wife; J2 goes for a socially distanced walk; Heavy metal; Creating J3; Baby steps: Original robot J1 is a primitive, non-speaking prototype.

THE ADVANCED MODEL: J3

While J1 and J2 shuffle around in the background, George works on his main project: a human-like android that carries the archived memories of his dead wife. J3 looks advanced, but the effect was achieved with a relatively simple mix of make-up, prosthetics and visual effects. As Rothery explains, the actor, Stacy Martin, was "in full costume" on her upper body, with "green trousers, standing on an apple box" so that her legs could be edited out in post-production. Martin spent "four-and-a-half hours in make-up, and another two-and-a-half at the end of the day," which was, Rothery admits, "a bit of a nightmare [for her]. But at the end of the day, she's feeding that into the performance. When you see J3 looking frustrated, that's Stacy using the make-up chair energy."

J3 is the most human-like of the robots, but there are still design choices being made. The lines on her face, for example, suggest the mechanical structure underneath. "The idea was, it's just not quite finished," says Rothery. "Those are almost like witness marks. If you look at the bottom of any plastic moulded dustbin, there's always these little artefacts that betray the manufacturing process." From Honda to dustbins: the references run deep here. **JOHN NUGENT**

ARCHIVE IS IN CINEMAS FROM 15 JANUARY AND ON

DIGITAL FROM 18 JANUARY

No. 7 Sam Neill's guide to sheep

The actor, real-life farmer and star of new dramedy **RAMS** offers his tips for budding farmers

WHEN SAM NEILL isn't battling dinosaurs, he's hanging out with sheep. The actor owns a vineyard and farm in New Zealand, which — as well as producing the acclaimed Two Paddocks wine — is home to a menagerie of animals, including around 25 sheep, all named after former co-stars (including Jeff Goldblum the ram, and Susan Sarandon the ewe). That made him perfect for the role in his new film, *Rams*, where he plays a sheep farmer forced to hide his herd in his house after a disease sweeps his valley. He is not short on woolly wisdom, then.

SHEEP DON'T MAKE GREAT ACTORS

"We had some sheep that had been ostensibly trained prior to filming *Rams*. Sheep are only biddable to a certain extent. You never see a performing sheep in a circus. These ones [in the film] were perfectly fine. And they were beautiful. Our main ram was a gorgeous creature. He'd wander over to me sometimes in the morning. So I knew he recognised me. We'd have a few words now and again. We were pretty good friends by that time [they filmed a scene where Neill sponge-baths a ram]. It's not often you share a bath with a ram. That takes a certain level of trust."

RAMS ARE PRETTY HORNY (IN EVERY SENSE)

"A ram has more important things on his mind. It's a little known fact that they are the most prodigious male animal on the planet. A good ram can, to use an English expression, shag 80 ewes in a day. There is no other animal on the planet with that capacity. They are a wonder of nature — it just happens to be in the bedroom department. I have first-hand experience. Poor Hugo Weaving [the ram] actually died on the job, while he was proving his phenomenal bedroom capacities."

SHEEP MAKE STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

"Every animal needs a friend. [My ram] Jeff Goldblum was destined, I'm afraid, for the local butcher. I don't particularly like that. And so Jeff Goldblum has instead been retired, with honours. He resides with his best friend, who is a Kunekune pig. He will live out his days in pig company. They're quite fond of each other. Also, we had this strange, wild sheep turn up. It had been on the lamb, so to speak. It looked like a zeppelin balloon of wool, with the most enormous afro. It hadn't

been shorn for years. We put it in with this horse — and they're inseparable. If you move one, the other one has to come. The sheep stands under the horse when it's raining to keep dry. They just will not be parted."

IT'S OKAY TO LOVE SHEEP MORE THAN PEOPLE

"My dad was not a farmer as such, but he had a small farm and he bred South Suffolk sheep. I've continued that tradition. My mother and father, who were British, were great animal-lovers. When I think of my upbringing, we always had dogs and cats and things, and because my parents were so British, all the dogs and cats got all the cuddles — the children got none at all! [laughs] It's not that they didn't love us. They did. But I think that's what the English do. They lavish their pets with physical affection. And at best speak kindly to the children. [laughs]" **JOHN NUGENT**

RAMS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 12 FEBRUARY AND ON DIGITAL FROM 26 FEBRUARY

Above: "Will you two stop behaving like sheep? Oh, hold on..." **Right:** Sam Neill and the film's star ram enjoy some quality time together.



SMALL
TALKGEORGE
CLOONEY

How have the last few months been for you, pandemic-wise?

It's been fine. Look, I'm a lucky person. I have a home here in LA with three acres of land in town. And I'm also lucky because our kids are three and they're not 12, and I don't have to sit with them in front of a computer and relearn trigonometry. For us, it's as good as it can be. I worry about my folks — my dad's 87 and my mom's 82. They're in Kentucky. You worry about them.

Are things getting better in California?

It's just frustrating. I always thought that Trump was just a dumbass but it's worse than that — he actually knew it was five times worse than the flu and he knew it was airborne. If he had said that, all of his followers would have been wearing masks. Instead, we have to do it the other way around.

Have you kept busy this year, aside from work?

Because we wanted to be really careful, it's just Amal, me and the kids. So, y'know, I'm doing the laundry and mopping. I've been taking out the garbage and doing the dishes every day since mid-March. Yesterday I spent all day re-staining the outside furniture. I actually feel like my mother in 1964. I have some idea why she burned her bra! **JOHN NUGENT**

THE MIDNIGHT SKY IS ON NETFLIX

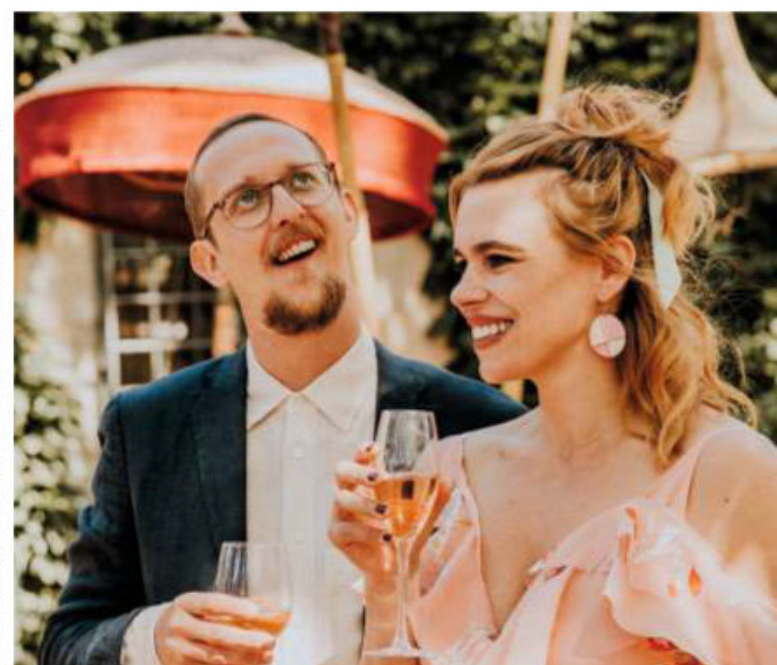
FROM 23 DECEMBER

No./8
The anti-romcom
leading man

Actor Leo Bill on being Billie Piper's unorthodox romantic interest in her directorial debut, *Rare Beasts*

LEO BILL MIGHT not seem like a conventional romcom star, but *Rare Beasts* — Billie Piper's directorial debut, in which he stars — isn't a conventional romcom. Pete (Bill) and Mandy (Piper) are a pair of messy coworkers-turned-lovers, and both bring their fair share of baggage to the relationship: she's a single mother trying to figure out what she wants in a relationship, while he's abrasive at best, misogynistic at worst. The opening scene epitomises the dynamic perfectly: Pete says he finds women "intolerable"; Mandy vomits in the street; Pete then declares they'll be married within a year.

"They're utterly flawed," Bill says with a chuckle. "Pete's not a great guy, and I imagine there will be people who will absolutely hate him. But, for me, whichever part you play, no matter how horrendous they are, you've got to find a way to love them. He's a guy who thinks he knows what he believes, but I saw him as someone struggling to understand himself and his place in the world as much as anybody. I wanted to lean into his bad qualities — but not turn him into a baddie."



Top: Leo Bill plays Pete who's "not a great guy". Above: The odd couple: Pete and Mandy (Billie Piper).

Although *Rare Beasts* is about a romantic couple and, at times, very funny, the film couldn't be further from a British romcom. "I don't think I've ever fitted the Richard Curtis mould," Bill says. "But it wasn't a route we were going down anyway. British movies in that genre tend to be just quite nice. I looked more at French and Scandinavian cinema and John Cassavetes' *Minnie And Moskowitz* for inspiration, which are all a bit more raw and loose."

As he admits, Bill has played his fair share of oddballs, in films from *28 Days Later* to *In Fabric*. "I spent a lot of time in my career playing guys who never get the girl; they normally try to get the girl and then are waiting in the bush to attack the girl." His role in *Rare Beasts* marks a more subdued, albeit still eccentric, turn. "To be honest, the hardest thing for me was playing just a normal guy. No weird limp, no wig, just normal. It turned into a Daniel Day-Lewis achievement!" **KATIE GOH**

RARE BEASTS IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 FEBRUARY

No. 9 How a 1940s singer became a 2020s icon

Director **LEE DANIELS** on why now is the perfect time to tell the warts-and-all tale of jazz legend Billie Holiday's tumultuous life

LEE DANIELS' FILM about influential jazz singer Billie Holiday has been a long time coming. It's a story about a woman beaten down by the American authorities, who themselves tried — to some degree successfully — to change her narrative. Daniels' take seems like perfect timing.

There was a previous biopic, 1972's *Lady Sings The Blues*, starring Diana Ross. She won a Golden Globe for her performance, but the film was a glossy endeavour, taking huge liberties with Holiday's story and containing little of her raw grit. Still, it was important for Daniels. "I was a young teenager when it came out," he recalls. "It had such a profound effect on me. It had icons like Diana Ross and Billy Dee Williams, at a time when Black people really needed to see a Black love affair. It really set the trajectory off for me to become a filmmaker. But it wasn't a true story."

The United States Vs. Billie Holiday aims to be a true story. Taking its cue from a chapter in *Chasing The Dream*, Johann Hari's investigative book about America's war on drugs, it stars singer Andra Day in the title role, with a screenplay by Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Suzan-Lori Parks. Hari wrote about the FBI relentlessly trying to arrest Holiday for drug charges, devastating her career in the process. Many believe this was due to Holiday's song *Strange Fruit*, a darkly

evocative rallying cry against the lynching of Black men which she sang throughout the 1940s and '50s.

The film expands on this, focusing on the relationship between Holiday and Jimmy Fletcher (*Moonlight*'s Trevante Rhodes), the Black FBI agent tasked with arresting her at the peak of her fame. "When he got to understand who Billie was and what he was doing, he was sort of a double agent," explains Daniels. "He fell in love with her." The film widens its net to take in much of Holiday's life, including some of her other relationships, notably actor Tallulah Bankhead (Natasha Lyonne). "She's one of the few besides Jimmy that really doesn't want anything from Billie," says Daniels.

The focus, though, is on Holiday herself. Daniels had some trepidation about casting Grammy-nominated singer Day, but that soon dissipated. "I was terrified of working with her at first," he admits. "Because she'd never acted. But her voice was incredible. And she embodied the spirit of Billie. I knew that I was dealing with the soul of Billie. Literally the soul of Billie. I'd never witnessed anything like this before, and I've

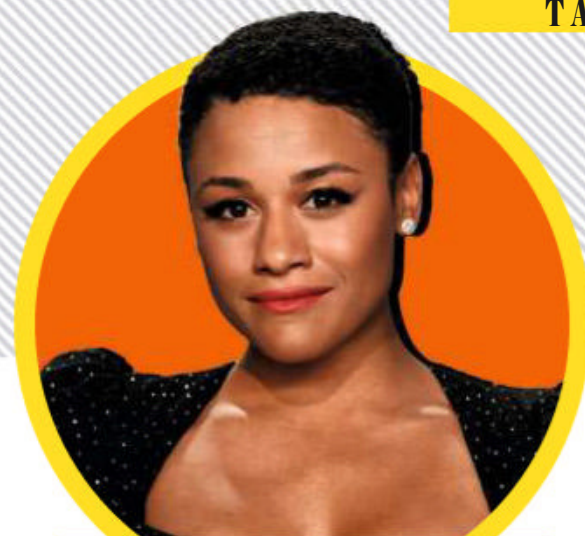
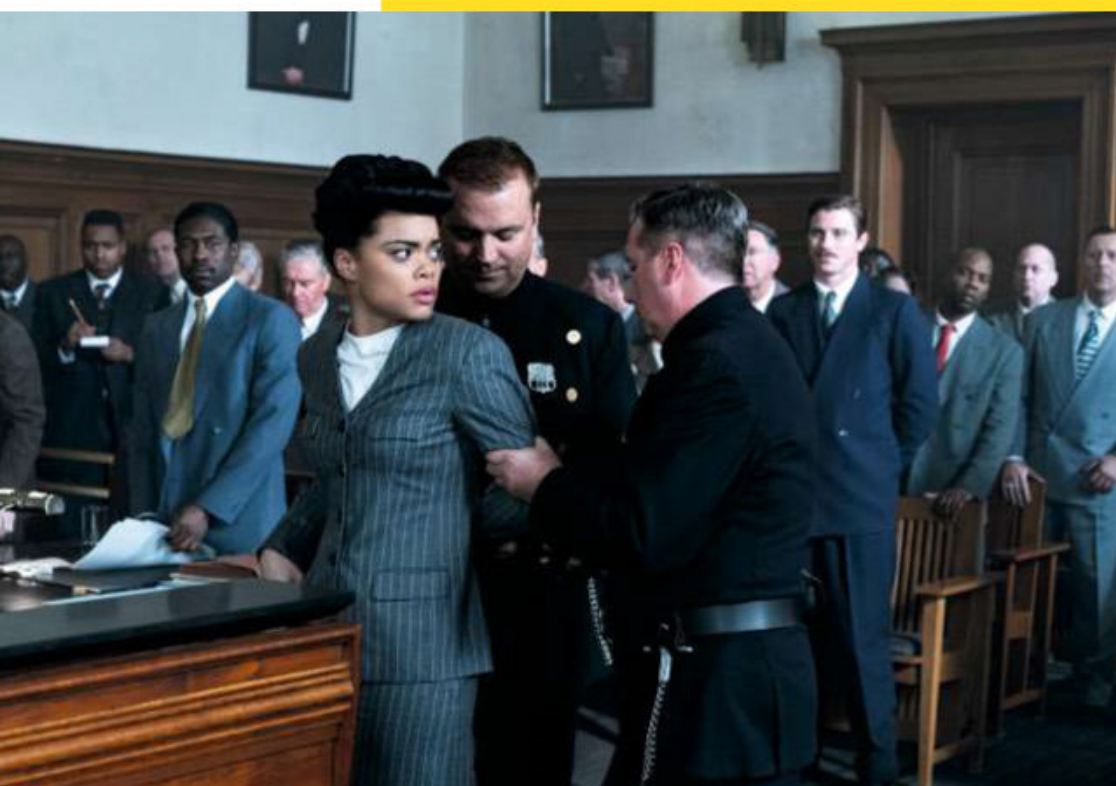
worked with some great actors."

It's a lead character with currency, and Daniels speaks keenly of the broader context. "Obama's Presidency unleashed the fury of Black men being shot and targeted," he says. "America is divided. And I think that this film shows that unless we have people like Billie Holiday to stand up to the government, we're gonna be in trouble." He hopes it galvanises audiences. "This movie is a call to arms," he says. Holiday didn't live to realise the extent of her legacy; in 2020, it seems as significant as ever. **ALEX GODFREY**

THE UNITED STATES VS. BILLIE HOLIDAY IS IN CINEMAS FROM 12 MARCH



Clockwise from left: Andra Day as Billie Holiday; Struggling with fame; Director Lee Daniels with Day and Trevante Rhodes (who plays Jimmy Fletcher) on set; With Lester 'Prez' Young (Tyler James Williams); In court on drugs charges.



INTRODUCING...

Ariana DeBose

THE *HAMILTON* ORIGINAL CAST MEMBER IS NOW STARRING IN MAJOR MOVIE MUSICALS FOR RYAN MURPHY AND STEVEN SPIELBERG

ON THE MOMENT THAT HOOKED HER INTO ACTING

"I think I was six years old. I believe I was performing a number where I was supposed to be a genie, and I really liked it when everyone clapped. I started out very focused on dance, but my goal was to be very versatile. You need to be able to sing, dance, act, breathe fire and fly. And rollerskate! So when I moved to New York at 18, I made it my goal to train in any way possible, whether that was watching YouTube videos or bartering for dance classes."

ON GETTING HER BIG BREAK

"The first day that I arrived in New York City, I auditioned to be a dancer on [long-running daytime soap opera] *One Life To Live*, [for] a series of musical episodes. I actually had a sprained ankle. But I had something to prove so I wrapped it up in an Ace bandage, put a big old Nike on and went in and auditioned and got the job. I took that as a sign of like, 'Okay, maybe don't do that again but it's gonna work out.'"

ON PLAYING 'THE BULLET' IN *HAMILTON*'S ORIGINAL CAST

"I knew the show was special: I wanted to be a part of it because I thought it had the ability to change the way we look at musical theatre. The Bullet was a really good secret for a long time, but when the show

was released on Disney+, it took off. She's a presence only. I love that because I frequently say I speak dance better than I speak English."

ON HER ROLE IN RYAN MURPHY'S FILM ADAPTATION OF *THE PROM*

"I saw the show on Broadway three times and I was very taken with Isabelle McCalla's portrayal of Alyssa Greene. I identify as LGBTQ, and it meant a lot to me to see a beautiful woman of colour playing that on a Broadway stage. At the time, I knew that Ryan Murphy had secured the rights. I remember saying a little prayer, like, 'I'd love to be a part of that.' And crazy manifestation, here I am!"

ON REFUSING TO AUDITION FOR STEVEN SPIELBERG FOR *WEST SIDE STORY*

"I ran away from that job [playing the role of Anita] so many times, I was very afraid of it. The casting director and my agent at the time practically had to push me into the door. For my initial audition, I didn't realise that Señor Spielberg was going to be in the room. I was playing Donna Summer on Broadway at the time, leading a show, and I had decided that I was not going to read. So I had to walk into a room and tell Steven bloody Spielberg that I wasn't reading for him. Thinking back now, that's very Anita. So it worked out." **HELEN O'HARA**

THE *PROM* IS ON NETFLIX NOW

No./10

"I don't want to retire. I'll go on 'til all my teeth fall out"

[THE Q&A] With an astonishing performance in new drama *The Father*, **SIR ANTHONY HOPKINS** shows no sign of stopping. It's all down to destiny, he says

HE'S WORKED WITH everyone from Coppola to Lynch, and played a pope, a Norse god, Van Helsing — and cinema's most famous cannibal. But Sir Anthony Hopkins' most satisfying role may be as an ordinary man losing his mind, opposite fellow Academy Award-winner Olivia Colman in new dementia drama *The Father*. If you believe the bookies, it could earn the 82-year-old Welshman another Oscar — but as he explains, he's taking a more philosophical approach to it.

***The Father* is an incredibly authentic depiction of dementia. How did you prepare for the role?**

In the past, friends of mine here in Los Angeles, they had their father — in his late eighties — come out and he thought he was still in New York. He said, "Where is my wife? I haven't seen her all morning." She'd been dead several years. They said, "Oh, she'll be back. She's out shopping." They were very compassionate. He seemed okay. He was living in his own little world. And he'd been a very active man. Very much like the character I play.

He slips from delight to rage to charm in split seconds. Is that a particular challenge?

All my job is to learn the lines. I actually enjoy learning lines. I go over and over and over so many times that I fill my brain with the words. That's all. It doesn't change the chemistry of my brain or anything like that. But when I go on set, I know what I'm going to do. And I listen.

Some actors — Daniel Day-Lewis, Gene Hackman — retire. But you still get life from it?

Oh yeah! I love working. I don't



want to retire. I'll go on 'til all my teeth fall out. I'm healthy and take care of my diet. I make sure I'm in good shape. But I can't run around like a lunatic anymore. It's funny. I am not by any stretch of the imagination a Method actor — although I've studied Stanislavski — but just

Top: The debonair Sir Anthony Hopkins. **Above:** With fellow Oscar-winner Olivia Colman in *The Father*.

by playing the Father every day, going on set, my knees and my back started hurting. My brain was feeding information to my body, I think, in a way, saying, "Oh, we're getting old." So I say to my brain: "I'm just pretending to be old. I'm just acting!"

Do you ever think about what might have happened if you hadn't left Port Talbot?

I often wonder. My wife, Stella, is doing a documentary on me and last year she interviewed my schoolteacher, who is now in his nineties. And he said, "Tony didn't have a clue. But he left school in 1955 and within ten years he was at the National

Theatre working with Laurence Olivier." And then I was working with two great stars, Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn [on *The Lion In Winter*]. How that happened to me I have no idea. I was just picked up and given a film test. I'd forgotten all that.

It made you think back?

Yeah! And I said, "Somebody else wrote the novel of my life." Now, am I talking about God or destiny? I am in a way. I think there's a force of nature that's in us. Call it God, universal mind, whatever you wanna call it. I'm not gonna get into that debate. But I believe in my life something extraordinary has happened — beyond my ego. I can't explain it. Working with Olivia Colman — wonderful actress — and I don't think she had any idea how her life was going to go. You make certain choices and then suddenly something else moves you forward through your life.

Your wife also directed you in new drama *Elyse*. How was that?

Oh, wonderful. She wrote it, directed it and got some wonderful performances. Lisa Pepper is in it and she's lovely. I just play the psychiatrist. To be directed was pretty good.

You've been getting great reviews and talk of an Oscar. Does that affect you one way or another?

It's very pleasant. But I don't live with that expectation. I'm very pleased. I wouldn't be cynical. I think it's lovely if they wanna talk like that. But I don't live into the future. It's fun and it's nice, but I'm more than happy that this film has had an impact on people. **NEV PIERCE**

THE FATHER IS IN CINEMAS FROM 8 JANUARY

No./11

WHAT HOLLYWOOD WILL LOOK LIKE IN THE BIDEN ERA

Three top screenwriters offer their predictions for cinema after Trump



MORE FILMS ABOUT AMERICA'S ROOTS

LIZ HANNAH (WRITER, *THE POST*)

"Trump wasn't some freak occurrence. He was a result of our history. I think a lot of American filmmakers will now be looking at our past mistakes to work out how not to repeat them. We have an obligation to the communities that Trump hurt to look at our history and wonder how we got here. We've woken up from a nightmare — now it's time to go to therapy to talk about it."

MORE NUANCED DEPICTIONS OF POLICE

GARY WHITTA (CO-WRITER, *ROGUE ONE: A STAR WARS STORY*)

"The way we see police on screen is going to change because of the George Floyd case, and Trump's response to it. We're so used to stories that hold them up as heroes, but the reality is that's not always the case. Already shows like [police sitcom] *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* are having to reconfigure what they do. I think that'll reach the big screen too."

MORE DARKNESS

DAVID RABINOWITZ (CO-WRITER, *BLACKKKLANSMAN*)

"It's crazy to say because we've had a lot of what have appeared to be dark movies, but I do think screenwriters have held back because things are so depressing in real life. The original script for Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, for example, had a super bleak ending. But there was a feeling after Trump took power that audiences needed a win, and they rewrote the end to be more upbeat. I wonder if now we'll see that darkness unleashed." **AL HORNER**

No./12

The all-new Island Of Dr. Moreau

Writer **Zack Stentz** reveals his updated TV-show take on the H.G. Wells sci-fi classic

THE LAST TIME someone adapted H.G. Wells' 1896 sci-fi horror story *The Island Of Dr. Moreau*, about a scientist playing God and creating human monsters via vivisection, it resulted in the 1996 Marlon Brando/Val Kilmer-starring turkey-monster, one of the most disastrous shoots ever. But that hasn't deterred writer Zack Stentz, who is currently developing *Moreau*, a TV show based on the novel.

"The problem with that movie wasn't anything inherently unadaptable about the material," Stentz points out. "There had been two successful film versions beforehand. That one went off the rails because Richard Stanley was this indie director in over his head with all of these crazy personalities. But that movie ain't boring. Which points to how compelling the material is."

Stentz has previously dealt with mutants (*X-Men: First Class*) and monster-populated islands (*Jurassic Park: Camp Cretaceous*), so it's unsurprising to learn he's loved the book since childhood. And the time couldn't be more ripe for a 21st-century remix, he thinks.

Firmly taking the beast-folk-creating doctor's perspective, the show will "tell this story as

Top: A scene from 1977's *The Island Of Dr. Moreau*. Above right: The poorly received 1996 version was the third major film adaptation of the H.G. Wells book. Below: *Moreau* writer/developer Zack Stentz.

essentially an Oppenheimer story for the age of genetic engineering," Stentz says.

"I was really intrigued by the idea of having, as the audience point of view, a character who wants to unlock the genome to help humanity and ends up creating monsters."

Interestingly, Stentz and co-creator Eric Bromberg have switched *Moreau*'s gender. Partly as a tribute to the prominence of female scientists in the genetic revolution ("Just a few weeks ago, it was two women who won the Nobel Prize for developing the CRISPR technology"), but also, says Stentz, because "we haven't had a lot of brilliant female anti-heroes as anchors for television, when we've had very many Tony Sopranos and Walter Whites."

It's still early days for *Moreau* — the show has a production company on board, but no network yet — but already, he says, "We've had A-list directors calling and saying, 'Can I direct the pilot?' — just because the idea of turning *Dr. Moreau* into a show is that compelling." Seems this new-look *Island* is going to be a reassuringly crowded place.

DAN JOLIN



No./13

"Dave was the opposite of everything Darth Vader was"

[IN MEMORIAM] Mark Hamill remembers **DAVE PROWSE** — the Bristolian bodybuilder who became Darth Vader

THE FIRST TIME I met Dave was when he came on set in the full Darth Vader outfit. I'd seen Ralph McQuarrie's concept art, but to see it fully realised was stunning. A big part of that was just Dave's size. He was a towering figure with this magnificent presence. Although we didn't know it at the time, we were seeing the creation of one of the most iconic, enduring and feared villains of all time. That's a tribute to him and to George Lucas's storyline, because he's only in that original film for less than ten minutes.

Even though I wasn't working that day, I remember being on set when they filmed Darth Vader's opening scene. I asked George: "How come there's no exposition when he first comes in? Why don't you cut to somebody saying: 'That's Darth Vader, the dark lord of the Sith?'" George very nonchalantly said: "We'll play some scary music and that'll be enough!" How right he

was. Dave's physicality was so crucial to the character, so the fact Darth Vader was voiced by another actor doesn't in any way take away from his contribution.

Dave came out of the athletics world. He was a weightlifter, and a championship weightlifter at that. I think it was his imposing physical size that got the attention of Stanley Kubrick. In *A Clockwork Orange*, Dave has to carry full-grown men around so they needed somebody that could actually do that.

His background meant Dave didn't have the theatrical personality of an actor. He was never arrogant or boastful, and in many ways he was innocent in the ways of showbusiness. He famously came out of a screening of *The Empire Strikes Back* and went up to the press and revealed the ending. When we'd filmed that climatic scene, the line in the script was: "You



Clockwise from left: The man behind the mask; "Come to Daddy!"; With Mark Hamill in *Return Of The Jedi*; We are family: Harrison Ford, Dave Prowse, Carrie Fisher, Kenny Baker, Peter Mayhew and Mark Hamill in 1980.

don't know the truth. Obi-Wan killed your father!" The director Irvin Kershner took me to one side and told me the real line. The only other person that knew was George, so if it leaked they'd know it was me. I had the enormous burden of keeping it to myself for well over a year. At the screening, Harrison Ford was in the row in front of me and turned around and said: "You didn't even tell me that!" Afterwards we all walked out and there was a big line of journalists. Dave just rolled right up and said: "I couldn't believe it. Not only do I lop off Luke's hand, I'm his bleedin' father!"

I want Dave to be remembered for what a kind and genuine person he was. It seems so ironic that someone as ruthless, cold-hearted and evil as Darth Vader was portrayed by someone who was really a gentle giant. Dave was the opposite of everything Darth Vader was.

AS TOLD TO KEVIN EG PERRY

No./14

BRING ON THE
SCORPION KING
REBOOT**Empire's John Nugent on
the welcome return of
The Rock's blockbuster**

THE SCORPION KING is not a film remembered fondly by history. A 2002 spin-off prequel of easily the worst of the *Mummy* sequels, it detailed the pre-Pyramid years of ancient Egyptian Mathayus (Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson), before the Egyptian god of death, Anubis, condemned him to the underworld. *Empire's* two-star review said, "If only the story was as well-developed as its leading man's body."

So news of a reboot has, perhaps understandably, been greeted with scepticism. But nostalgia is a powerful thing. Like many people of my generation, I have happy memories of loading up the DVD on my PlayStation 2 and revelling in the even-then-quite-bad CGI and sword-and-sandals adventuring. To call it a guilty pleasure is to do it a disservice: there's something about that unabashed late '90s/early '00s blockbuster cheesiness that I genuinely miss.

It seems Johnson misses it too. "I wouldn't have had the career I'm lucky enough to have had it not been for *The Scorpion King*," he said on Instagram. And it's true. It's easy to forget that at the time, Johnson was better known as a wrestler, and treated as a punchline in Hollywood. Few could have predicted he would soon be the highest-paid actor in the world.

But he's properly fantastic in *The Scorpion King*: charisma oozing from all his sweaty, glistening, alpha-male pores. In every scene, he's magnetic, funny and, importantly, muscly: a truly worthy inheritor of the '80s crop of outlandish action heroes. Whether he appears in the new film remains to be seen — Johnson is now so in demand that his schedule is locked until 2022 — but I will hungrily welcome whatever his Seven Bucks production company rustles up, ready for repeat viewings on my PS2.

BLACK
IN FOCUS**AMON WARMANN** chews over the main
moment in Black film and TV this monthBeth (Anya Taylor-Joy) with BFF
Jolene (Moses Ingram).THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT
SUFFERS FROM THE
'MAGICAL NEGRO'
PROBLEM

THE CHESS PLAYER in me was quickly won over by *The Queen's Gambit*. The Netflix miniseries sees Anya Taylor-Joy's young prodigy Beth Harmon rise through the ranks of the competitive chess world in the 1960s. That made it all the more disappointing when I excitedly hit play on the final hour, only to see the show fall headfirst into an outdated trope: the 'Magical Negro'.

Like Beth, Moses Ingram's Jolene is a fellow orphan whom we meet in the inaugural episode, a then-bratty teen who takes our protagonist under her wing. But we never see or hear about her again until she turns up on Beth's doorstep just as she's in the midst of a self-destructive, alcohol-fuelled

spiral. Despite dialogue which explicitly states that Jolene isn't Beth's "guardian angel", that's exactly what she becomes; in addition to sobering her up, she funds our heroine's expensive trip to Russia for the series-ending matches.

Had we seen more of Jolene — the *only* Black character of any significance in the entirety of the series — and her relationship with Beth prior to her reappearance in

the final episode, this may not have been so much of an issue. Instead, all we get are unearned platitudes like "we're family" that ring false. Meanwhile, beyond surface-level details on her job as a paralegal, Jolene is not fleshed out nearly enough as a character in her own right. This makes her little more than the Black best friend who serves no function other than to help white characters when they need it most.

This is not a problem that's unique to *The Queen's Gambit*. *The Green Mile*, *The Legend Of Bagger Vance* and, more recently, Best Picture-winner *Green Book* all perpetuated this backward stereotype to varying degrees. But now more than ever, even when Black characters aren't leading the narrative, it's crucial that they are given full arcs that have nothing to do with servicing the stories of their white counterparts. That way, we will be seen as more than pawns to white characters' Queens, and the art and the audience will be better for it.

CLASSIC PICK
OF THE MONTH**MALCOLM X (1992)**

Denzel Washington gives the best performance of his career as the civil-rights icon in Spike Lee's uncompromising three-hour epic. An audacious biopic that avoids hagiography and deals with race, politics and religion while showing Malcolm's journey to controversial activism.



No./15

Sheen and Tennant reflect on the new normal. Below: The actors grapple with the dark art that is the mute button.

The very meta lockdown antidote

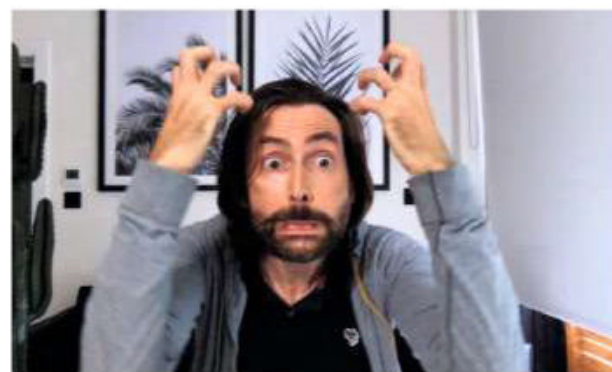
Michael Sheen and David Tennant on returning to play Michael Sheen and David Tennant in **STAGED**

AT THE HEIGHT of the first lockdown, Michael Sheen and David Tennant did what everyone had been doing: they had a chat on Zoom. The two stars workshopped some ideas and the result was *Staged*, a six-part series for the BBC about two fictionalised versions of Sheen and Tennant struggling and failing to rehearse a play. With a second series imminent, *Empire* jumped on a Zoom call with the pair — for what, it has to be said, felt like a spin-off episode of the show.

How has 2020 been for both of you?

David Tennant: Well, it was not as advertised in January, that's for sure [*laughs*]. The great joy of it, though, is that we've got to do *Staged* twice, which was a thing that didn't even exist before.

Michael Sheen: If someone had said, "You're gonna do two TV series in your kitchen," I wouldn't have ever believed them.



What can you tell us about series two, then?

Sheen: Series one seemed to connect with people in two ways: people really enjoyed having a laugh, which was nice, and without being too heavy-handed about it, we tried to reflect where everyone was with the whole pandemic stuff. Which is difficult when you've got two pony actors to do the representing. But I think by revealing how stupid and feckless the two of us are, I think maybe that helped. Is that fair, David?

Tennant: I think that's probably worryingly fair!

Where do we find the semi-fictional versions of David and Michael this time?

Tennant: You find us in a very different place, and yet exactly where you left us.

Sheen: When we did the first one, everyone kind of knew where they were: you're stuck in your house, you're not going anywhere. By the time we get to the second series, the rules keep changing. So we've tried to reflect that in this series.

Tennant: We're all slightly drowning in the ever-changing new normal.

Judi Dench telling you in the first series to "stop fucking about" was a highlight.

Tennant: Judi Dench swearing is one of the wonders of the modern world. There's something totally and utterly beguiling about it, isn't there?

Sheen: One of the things that I think people really enjoyed about the first series was having

the occasional guest coming in. We've pushed that much further this time. I mean, we start big. Without giving anything away. We nail our colours to the mast very early on.

Tennant: We splurge and keep splurging, really!

Sheen: There are some very *Empire* audience-specific things that are going to be really enjoyed. One episode in particular, I would say, is probably going to become a bit of an *Empire* favourite.

Michael, in an unusual move, you signed a petition calling for *Staged* to be cancelled...

Sheen: [*laughs*] It may be a bit late in the day to have the second series stopped now, because we have actually shot it. But there's still time for it to not go out. I'm still holding out for that.

Tennant: [*laughs*] This came from someone on the internet, did it?

Sheen: It did. I think there was a lady who decided to let me know, personally, that it was terrible, self-indulgent wank. I read that, and just thought... "Yeah! I think you're right. Let's get rid of it. Let's get rid of it forever. So that nobody has to watch it." Because clearly this poor woman was forced to watch every episode.

Tennant: Well, she's not wrong about it being self-indulgent wank. But people don't seem to mind that.

Sheen: Exactly. JOHN NUGENT

STAGED SERIES 2 IS ON BBC ONE FROM 4 JANUARY

No./16

WELCOME BACK TO THE PARTY, PAL

Die Hard director John McTiernan talks exclusively about his long-awaited comeback

JOHN McTIERNAN HASN'T made a film since 2003's *Basic*. But the director of some of the most beloved action movies of all time, whose career has been derailed by legal issues and a year in federal prison for perjury, refuses to give up. Back in 2014, he planned a sequel to *The Thomas Crown Affair*. That didn't happen. Neither did DEA thriller *Red Squad*, or John Travolta dog-fighting drama *Warbirds*. As the 69-year-old behind *Die Hard*, *Predator* and *The Hunt For Red October* tells *Empire*, though, he has a new project lined up. "It's a Marxist gunfighter movie," he says with a laugh. "Would you see it?"

Why, yes, we would. *Tau Ceti* ("We may call it *Tau Ceti Foxtrot*, I'm not sure yet," notes McTiernan) is named after a star in the Cetus constellation, and as that might suggest, is a big, sprawling sci-fi tale, set on a war-torn planet and following a trio of weapon-toting strangers set on taking down the oligarchs who rule it. Uma Thurman is attached, as is *Vikings*' Travis Fimmel. Only McTiernan's second sci-fi, after his troubled *Rollerball* remake, it was nearly ready to go, when life threw another spanner at his plans.

"We were about to shoot the film in Serbia when Covid happened," he says. "And now I don't know what we're gonna do. I could also do it here in Canada. It's easier to set up a bubble or set up some sort of isolation arrangement for a year. Although, in another six months I suppose we'll have enough vaccines around that they can finally get it under control. And we can go back to work."

It may have been nearly two decades since McTiernan last pointed a camera at an explosion. But old habits... well, you know the rest. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**



Alamy

TAKE 20

No./17

Carey goes carefree

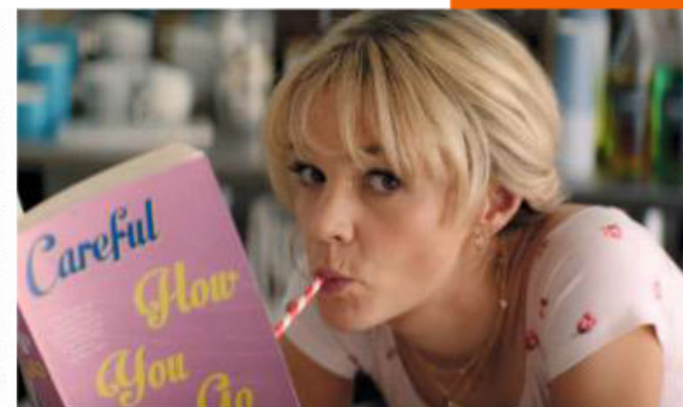
With a blinding lead role in *Promising Young Woman*, Carey Mulligan is learning to throw the shackles off

THE LAST TIME *Empire* interviewed Carey Mulligan, in 2018, she hinted at a new phase in her career, wanting to shake things up. Come through, then, Emerald Fennell, writer and director of *Promising Young Woman*. "The mission," says Mulligan now, thinking back to 2018, "was to do things that I hadn't seen before, or that looked at things in a different way, and *Promising Young Woman* definitely did that. I read it and thought, 'What the actual fuck? How do you pull this off?'"

The film is indeed a tonal rollercoaster — as Mulligan says, "dark, dark comedy and tragedy and trauma and darkness and horror that's also a love story... and a thriller" — but incredibly, it works. The same applies to Mulligan's character Cassie, a young woman who pretends to be absolutely slaughtered at nightclubs, only to turn the tables on the men who attempt to take advantage of her. There is trauma — and revenge — behind it all, and you root for her, even though she can be awful herself, spitting in a suitor's coffee because, well, why not.

All of this excited Mulligan. "I just think we don't need to like everything that someone does to love them," she says. "We all love people who behave in ways that we don't like all the time. 'I hope that you want the best for her because she's essentially a good person, and she's doing something that she believes in.' The film takes predatory men to task, and little research was needed there. 'The sad reality about this stuff is that pretty much every woman I know has experienced this kind of behaviour to varying degrees,' says Mulligan. "As a teenager and young woman, you just grow up with it."

Above and beyond what the film is exploring, though, she relished the opportunities to let loose — and there were many of them. "It's really



Clockwise from top: The nurse will see you now; Cassie (Carey Mulligan) takes a break from exacting revenge on predatory men; Director Emerald Fennell on set.

fun to smash up a car. That's just a fun day at work," she says. And then there's the sequence in which she and Bo Burnham sing along to Paris Hilton's *Stars Are Blind* in a pharmacy. She was inhibited for a bit. "For the first five takes I barely did anything. And Emerald was like, 'Carey, you *have* to do something. You've got to get into it.' I was like, 'I just don't think Cassie would.' She said, 'No, shut up.' So finally I thought, 'Oh fuck it, let's do it.'" The result is absurd, and glorious. Mulligan can consider her career well and truly shaken up. **ALEX GODFREY**

PROMISING YOUNG WOMAN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 12 FEBRUARY

No. 18

The Mauritanian

[ON-SET REPORT] **On location of the shocking true story about a man put through a gruesome 14-year ordeal**

WHERE? Cape Town, South Africa

WHEN? 28 January 2020

WHY? Because Kevin Macdonald (*Touching The Void*, *The Last King Of Scotland*) has assembled a killer cast including Jodie Foster, Benedict Cumberbatch and Tahar Rahim to tell the true story of Mohamedou Ould Slahi. After being falsely aligned with al-Qaeda, Slahi was detained for 14 years at Guantánamo Bay without charge.

WHAT DID YOU SEE? Guantánamo Bay. Well, a pretty intimidating replica, built from the ground up with Slahi's input. "If there's any misbehaving, you will be put in a detention cell," jokes the first AD, and Foster advises slapping on some sun-screen while having her lipstick reapplied. With temperatures hitting the mid-20s by 10am and uniformed extras wilting over their pastries, it's not a bad shout.

WHAT WAS BEING FILMED? The day starts with Foster's character Nancy Hollander — based on the lawyer who helped to free Slahi — visiting his cell with her colleague Teri (Shailene Woodley). "I've only played a real person once in my life before," says Foster, savouring the shade under our marquee. "I'm always worried about the

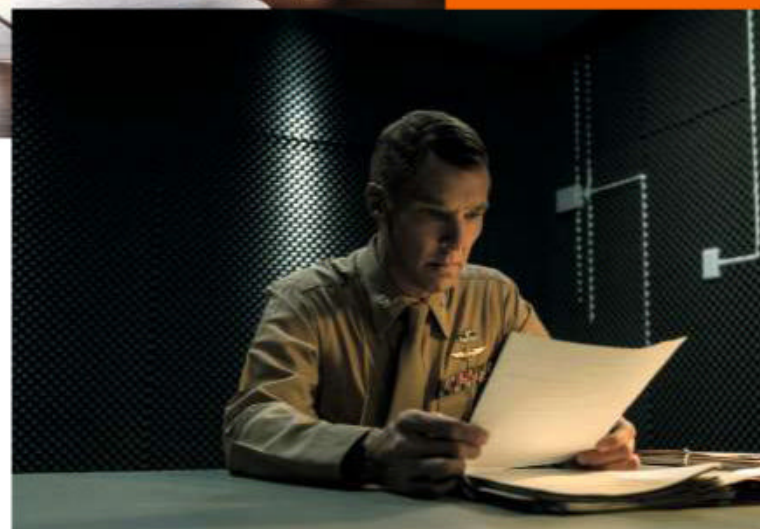
limitations that come with that, but Nancy's got these bright nails and lipstick and is just a hoot." *Empire* then joins Macdonald in the Guantánamo medical centre where Rahim, who plays Slahi, arrives in his prison jumpsuit with bruises painted on his face. He has a quick smoke before going to have his head shaved for the next phase of Slahi's story. "I usually refuse this kind of role, especially in America," says Rahim. "But this was something different. When I read the script, I cried twice."

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT? "When I met Nancy, she said this may be the first Muslim man in an American movie that people really get to know," says Foster, who took the role because she was so enamoured with Slahi's story of resilience. "He befriended all the guards," Macdonald explains. "One named their son after him, another went on holiday with him. It's a testament to how amazing he is."

WHY IS THE BIG LEBOWSKI RELEVANT? While detained, Slahi watched the Coen Brothers' classic many times after resonating with its story of mistaken identity. "He knows every line and every song in that film," says Macdonald. Rahim even included a rewatch in his research process. "Of course, he fell in love with *The Dude*," he says. **BETH WEBB**

THE MAURITANIAN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 26 FEBRUARY

Clockwise from main: Shailene Woodley and Jodie Foster as Teri Duncan and Nancy Hollander; Benedict Cumberbatch plays prosecutor Stu Couch; Tahar Rahim as Guantánamo detainee Mohamedou Ould Slahi; Director Kevin Macdonald and Foster on set.



THE FALCON AND THE WINTER SOLDIER (EARLY 2021, DISNEY+)

HELEN O'HARA, EDITOR-AT-LARGE

Not to be a raging parody of myself, but the prospect of a Captain America spin-off series has me all atwitter, and the fact that this one looks set to delve into some timely real-world issues — how will a hostile establishment react to a Black Captain America? What exactly *is* Bucky's legal status? — only makes it more enticing. Add in the return of Zemo, the only Avengers villain to see his plan all the way through, and I'm there with bells on. And giant mechanical wings.

JUDAS AND THE BLACK MESSIAH

(SPRING 2021, IN CINEMAS)

ALEX GODFREY, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

This trailer got me: from Daniel Kaluuya's defiant turn towards the camera, from Lakeith Stanfield's shimmering fear, from Jesse Plemons' intimidating, shit-eating grin. It got me! This is director Shaka King's take on Fred Hampton (Kaluuya), the 20-year-old chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, but also a two-hander between Kaluuya and Stanfield, who plays the petty criminal roped into being an FBI informant in a mission to bring Hampton down. Kaluuya. Stanfield. Plemons. Three absolute forces. Give this to me now.

IT'S A SIN (JANUARY 2021, CHANNEL 4)

CHRIS LUPTON, CREATIVE DIRECTOR

To be fair, you had me at the title! Any show that dares name itself after one of my favourite Pet Shop Boys songs deserves my full attention. Ever since reading our story from last issue, I cannot wait for this. Russell T Davies has a knack of brilliantly telling queer stories from a queer perspective, and this part of British gay history is a story that must not be

forgotten. The '80s AIDS epidemic might not be everyone's idea of a bunch of laughs, but it's important our stories are told, especially for the younger generation of queer folk who won't know much about this moment in time. As *Pose* has done for American gay history, I'm sure RTD's quintessential British perspective will still enlighten us while we 'bop' to that '80s soundtrack. I'll be wearing my hair high!

MALCOLM & MARIE (FEBRUARY 2021, NETFLIX)

ALIYAH ALLEN, DESIGNER

When I first saw the stills for this, the phrase "inject it into my veins", was the only way I could describe my intrigue and excitement. Shot in black and white, I imagine it will be nothing less than cinematic beauty. But also: could the leading duo be any better? John David Washington and Zendaya play a couple exploring the revelations and strength of their relationship after a film premiere. Directed by Sam Levinson, who is behind the mind-bending greatness that is *Euphoria*, I honestly can't wait to see what's in store. Hit me right in the feels, please.

WHAT I'M WATCHING**CHRIS PRATT ON *FAUDA*** (ON NETFLIX NOW)

I really got into *Fauda* when I was in London. It's really great. It's about these Mossad-style agents working in the West Bank. It's a little bit like *Homeland*. There's this undercover operative who's trying to thwart a terrorist in the West Bank and in Palestine. I would definitely recommend it — and I would recommend doing the subtitled version and not the American dubbed version. I watched the second season on American Netflix, and I couldn't figure out how to get subtitles and all of a sudden, I was listening to American people dub their voices over it and it was terrible! So I've yet to see Season 2 with the proper voices, but yeah, *Fauda* was dope.

No./19 THE WATCH LIST

Team *Empire* (and a famous friend) on their upcoming picks from TV and film

[AN ACQUIRED TASTE]

No./20 THE QUEEN OF BLACK MAGIC

A NOTORIOUS INDONESIAN HORROR GETS A GRUESOME MODERN REBOOT

IT'S A REMAKE OF AN INFAMOUS ORIGINAL

The Queen Of Black Magic is a new version of Liliek Sudjio's gnarly 1981 film. "It was all about that gore factor," laughs the update's director, Kimo Stamboel. There was a lot of that in Joko Anwar's new screenplay, too. Executive producer Sunil Samtani even asked Stamboel to tone it down. "I said, 'We can't, man!' I wanted to push it a bit."

IT'S AN EYE-POPPING ORDEAL

The updated story takes place in an orphanage under supernatural assault from a vengeful former resident. People are boiled and burned, and suffer ocular trauma and forced self-mutilation. There's also a startling beheading. "I saw

the original when I was seven, and I was traumatised by the head coming off," Stamboel recalls. "When the producers brought this to me I was like, 'Oh shit, that movie?' I was really excited then."

IT'S NOT FOR THE PHOBIC

Along with the physical violence, there's also enough squirmy, creepy-crawly action to fill a whole Temple Of Doom. One character is exploded as the result of internal bug infestation. Most of the stunt creatures are CG, "but we brought all the creatures to the set, so the cast could get a physical sense of them." They must have been so pleased. **OWEN WILLIAMS**

THE QUEEN OF BLACK MAGIC IS ON SHUDDER

FROM 28 JANUARY



PINT OF MILK

IAN McSHANE

Do you have a nickname?

My wife calls me 'Beaver', or 'the Beav'. Being American, she thinks I'm a grown-up version of the boy from *Leave It To Beaver*. She grew up with that programme, but I've not seen it, so I'm scared to do so in case I don't like the kid.

When were you the most starstruck?

I think once in my life. It was about 1970 and a friend of ours in London was having a dinner party. We all arrived at his house in Mayfair and he said, "I've got an extra guest for dinner tonight, a friend of mine: Marlon Brando." I think my jaw dropped. He's my favourite actor. After the dinner, Marlon said, "We're all going out to Ronnie Scott's jazz club." You don't want to meet your heroes, but he was great — as charming as you'd hope. My hero did not have clay feet.

What is the worst smell in the world?

My wife and I were on the way to Australia and we stopped in Singapore, and I attempted to have durian fruit about three days in a row. I thought I'd try it in ice-cream form, but it's like somebody farting in your mouth.

What character were you in your first school play?

It was a Jean-Paul Sartre play called *Nekrassov*. A geography teacher, a man called Leslie Ryder, told me, "You will play Nekrassov." The following year he said, "You're playing Cyrano de Bergerac." And I went to drama school after that. He was partly responsible for launching me on the world, so you can thank or despise him, take your pick.

How much is a pint of milk?

Here, it's about a dollar a pint. You only buy it in gallons, though. So a half gallon is about four dollars, maybe an extra dollar for organic. And in London, it's probably around about 60p.

What one thing do you do better than anyone else you know?

Probably wear a dressing gown without exposing



myself. I've always been known as very deft with a dressing gown. I like that better than saying my spaghetti bolognese is better than anyone else's.

Do you have any scars?

I've got a big scar on my thumb from when I fell on location back on the Yorkshire Moors in 1965 doing *Wuthering Heights*, yelling for Catherine Earnshaw. I fell over a big rock, went arse over tit and ended up in hospital.

What is your earliest memory?

It sounds fanciful, but it's quite true: during the war, being bathed in front of the fire in a big tub

in Blackburn by my mother. My dad was off taking part in the downfall of Adolf Hitler.

What scares you?

Social media. That's the only thing. I'd never join it, there's no point. It's a totally insulated other world.

One a scale of one to ten, how hairy is your arse?

I don't look in the mirror a lot, especially at my own arse, I'm not keen on that. There's probably a bit of bum fluff, but as Alan Bennett used to say, "Esau was a hairy man, but I am a smooth man."

What is your favourite animal?

A penguin. I've always loved them, I think they're enigmatic and funny and sort of sexy in a way.

Are penguins sexy?

Yeah, they come in all sorts! Remember the two penguins in New York they found out were gay? They lived together very happily.

What movie have you seen the most?

The Big Lebowski. It's the only one I keep on the phone or the tablet because it makes me laugh and the people in it are incredible.

Do you have a favourite joke?

"I'd like to talk about my father. My dad was a wonderful man. I'll never forget the last words he said to me: 'Fuck me, a bus!'" JAMES WHITE

COMING SOON

AMERICAN GODS (2021)

The big-budget Amazon adaptation of Neil Gaiman's classic fantasy book returns for a third season, with McShane's enigmatic trickster god Mr Wednesday once again at the heart of all the action.

JOHN WICK: CHAPTER 4 (2022)

McShane reprises his role of the Continental hotelier and criminal underworld figure in the series' fourth movie. Originally due for 2021, filming has been delayed due to the pandemic.

AMERICAN GODS SEASON 3 IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM 11 JANUARY

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ON SCREEN

24 DEC-
15 JAN

BIG SCREEN. SMALL SCREEN. YOUR REVIEWS BIBLE STARTS HERE

★★★★★ EXCELLENT

★★★★★

★★★★★ GOOD

★★★

★★★ OKAY

★★★ POOR

★★★ AWFUL

[EDITED BY IAN FREER]

[FILM]

WONDER WOMAN 1984

★★★★★

OUT NOW (CINEMAS)
CERT 12A / 151 MINS

DIRECTOR Patty Jenkins

CAST Gal Gadot, Chris Pine, Kristen Wiig, Pedro Pascal, Robin Wright, Connie Nielsen

PLOT In 1984, Diana Prince (Gadot) is living a quiet life in Washington and discreetly helping people as Wonder Woman. That is until a scheme from charlatan businessman Maxwell Lord (Pascal) threatens global catastrophe, tempting bumbling gemologist Barbara Minerva (Wiig) down a dark path, and giving Diana something she never expected: the return of her long-dead lover, Steve Trevor (Pine).



FOR THE FIRST time in about two decades, 2020 has been a year without a single major planet-rescuing superhero on the big screen. (*Birds Of Prey* arguably qualifies, though Harley Quinn was more concerned with saving an egg sandwich than saving the world.) After years of box-office dominance, the one thing DC and Marvel's greatest heroes weren't prepared for was a global pandemic. But as the year closes, one comic-book blockbuster has defied the odds to make it to the big screen and rescue 2020 from total misery: *Wonder Woman 1984*.

It's fitting that Diana Prince is the one to swoop in and save the day — after all, she was the original bright new hope of the DC Extended Universe, once so mired in morally murky seriousness (and visually murky set-pieces). Patty Jenkins' 2017 film pierced the grimdark pomposity of *Man Of Steel* and *Batman v Superman* in an outing that dared to embrace the inherent goodness of its central hero, a sincerity that shone through both in its super-powered set-pieces, and in the budding romance between



Clockwise from left: Wonder woman: Gal Gadot; Remind you of anyone? — Pedro Pascal as the bigly corrupt Maxwell Lord; Catch her if you can: Lilly Aspell as the young Diana; I wanna be like you: Barbara (Kristen Wiig) meets Diana.

Gal Gadot's Amazonian warrior-goddess Diana and Chris Pine's human (but superhumanly handsome) World War I pilot Steve Trevor.

It's clear that Jenkins feels even more empowered this time around to hold firm to Wonder Woman's intrinsic ethos: that she is a bastion of truth and honesty, whose physical strength is complemented by the warmth, love and generosity that she radiates. Jenkins' belief in and understanding of Diana's true power is written right into the DNA of *Wonder Woman 1984*, shining through in its quietly revolutionary imagery and the thematic underpinnings that pit our hero against Pedro Pascal's shady villain.

Where *Wonder Woman* pitched a previously sheltered Diana into wartime, the sequel fast-forwards several decades to the mid-'80s — and despite an initial influx of legwarmers, spandex and red-chrome Porsches, Jenkins resists leaning too heavily into the era's pop-culture signifiers. Instead, the '80s is invoked as a peak age of capitalist excess embodied by

Pascal's Maxwell Lord, all smarmy mannerisms and cheesy gestures. He's a very different kind of bad guy to *Wonder Woman*'s Ares, and yet niftily deployed as the antithesis of Diana — a liar-in-chief, appealing to people's basest instincts in order to further his own personal gain, corrupting everyone he encounters.

Combined with the film's Washington DC setting, it's not hard to see what — or, *who* exactly — Jenkins is getting at. Despite the retro setting, the Trumpian satire means *1984* speaks directly to 2020. "I'm not a con man... I'm a television personality," says Lord in one pointed barb. Pascal puts in an entertainingly broad performance, Lord's tacky persona becoming more unhinged as his Wolf Of Washington schtick gives way to a deeper corruption tied to the powers of a mysterious crystal.

Caught in Lord's tractor beam is Kristin Wiig's Barbara Minerva — a square gemologist who, per Lord's catchphrase, very much wishes for more. After an early encounter with the effortlessly elegant Diana, she longs to be "cool,

sexy, special" like her, sparking a Peter Parker-style glow-up. But as her admiration of Diana turns into something more dangerous, she goes from glamorous head-turner to full-blown Joan Jett — all smudged eyeliner, animal print and thigh-high boots. Wiig proves novel casting — her inherent likeability garners sympathy in the early scenes, but she holds her own through Barbara's transformation, conjuring real menace when she turns the tables on a predatory creep.

As with the last film, the heart and soul of *Wonder Woman 1984* is Gadot. Her Diana exudes grace and goodness, her power displayed with an unabashed femininity that still feels revelatory amid a crowded landscape of ripped male heroes. There's an acrobatic fluidity to her action choreography that's joyous to watch, a sense of weightlessness as she propels herself through the air. Superman might fly, but Wonder Woman *soars*.

Her dynamic with Steve Trevor (mysteriously returning for reasons we won't divulge, despite sacrificing his life in *Wonder* >

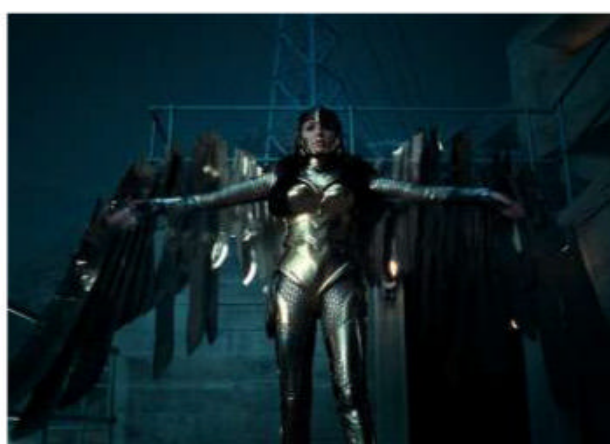


Woman) remains beautifully played. There are no Marvel-style gags here, but Pine draws plenty of chuckles as a more puppydog-ish version of his pilot. This time around *he* is the fish out of water and not Diana, marvelling at the wonders of a whole new age: punks, escalators, contemporary art and break-dancing. In a lovely touch, he is stunned by the achievements of NASA. After an action-heavy opening, *Wonder Woman 1984* downshifts gears to spend a significant amount of time with its characters — Steve and Diana in particular. While some might find it a little slow, the easy charm of their company is delightful to bask in.

When the action does kick in, a year largely devoid of spectacle means the set-pieces sing with an extra vitality. An opening flashback in which a young Diana (a returning Lilly Aspell) competes in an Olympic-style Amazonian contest is thunderous and jubilant, its propulsive energy matched by the unexpected thrill of seeing a little girl drive a massive action sequence. As with the last film, there's a wholesome tone that feels beamed in from a simpler era — one heavily armoured truck-chase is shot through with an *Indiana Jones*-ian sense of derring-do. If Jenkins' touchstone has always been Richard Donner's *Superman*, an immensely entertaining mall robbery conjures an unashamedly comic-booky kinetic flair akin to Raimi's *Spider-Man* films, while a later clash rivals *X2* for super-powered, White House-based showdowns. Notably, the formerly underused Lasso Of Truth gets more time to (literally) shine here, dazzling as it dances across the screen, and — in one joyous image — hitching a ride on a passing projectile.

Not all of the action lands. After the sludgy CGI climax of *Wonder Woman*, a face-off between Diana and an 'evolved' Barbara threatens to repeat similar failings. Thankfully, their brawl is a brief footnote in a final reel that shoots for a more ideological triumph of good over evil. One scene of personal sacrifice that dovetails into the final act perfectly captures an atypical form of heroism, rivalling the first film's No Man's Land sequence for sheer emotional power.

It's in this sense that *WW84* feels most triumphant. Between the pandemic, the protests



Top: Diana liked to take her lockdown workout to extreme levels. **Above:** She is gold! Gold!

against masks and vaccines, and the Presidential election, 2020 has been genuinely gruelling. It's hard to know exactly how Jenkins' film would have played had it been released months ago as intended — likely as an impassioned plea for collective empathy wrapped up in spandex. Now, as the vaccine rolls out and the Biden-Harris era looms, it feels like a colossal exhale — a promise of better days to come, testament to the reliability that light *will* triumph over darkness.

What's most clear in *Wonder Woman 1984* is that Patty Jenkins truly recognises the power of the imagery she's committing to the screen: what it means to see a young girl be an action hero; the resonance of a power-hungry businessman broadcasting on White House comms; the majesty of Diana ascending skyward in the pursuit of changing the world for the better. These moments are so potent that it already feels like they have a life beyond the screen. *Wonder Woman 1984* not only delivers the blockbuster thrills that 2020 has been missing — even more thrilling is the feeling it leaves you with: the hope that we too can propel ourselves into a brighter future. **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT A vibrant and virtuous adventure packed with all the heart and heroism we've come to expect from DC's shining light. *Wonder Woman 1984* really is the hero 2020 needed all along.



ARCHIVE

★★★

OUT 15 JANUARY (CINEMAS), 18 JANUARY (DIGITAL) / CERT 15 / 109 MINS

DIRECTOR Gavin Rothery

CAST Theo James, Stacy Martin, Rhona Mitra

Writer-director Gavin Rothery's slickly assembled sci-fi character study follows robotics genius George Allmore (a career-best Theo James, practically in every frame) trying to develop the perfect human android in a Japanese research facility following the death of his wife. The plot's cores and themes pilfer from a million sci-flicks (hello, *Silent Running*, *Moon*, *Ex Machina*) and subplots involving corporate subterfuge (hello, Toby Jones) invade the carefully built mood, but Rothery's world-building on a shoestring budget is mightily impressive. And the prototype robots J1 and J2 (who has feelings of jealousy over Allmore's latest creation) are scene-stealers. **IF**



HAPPIEST SEASON

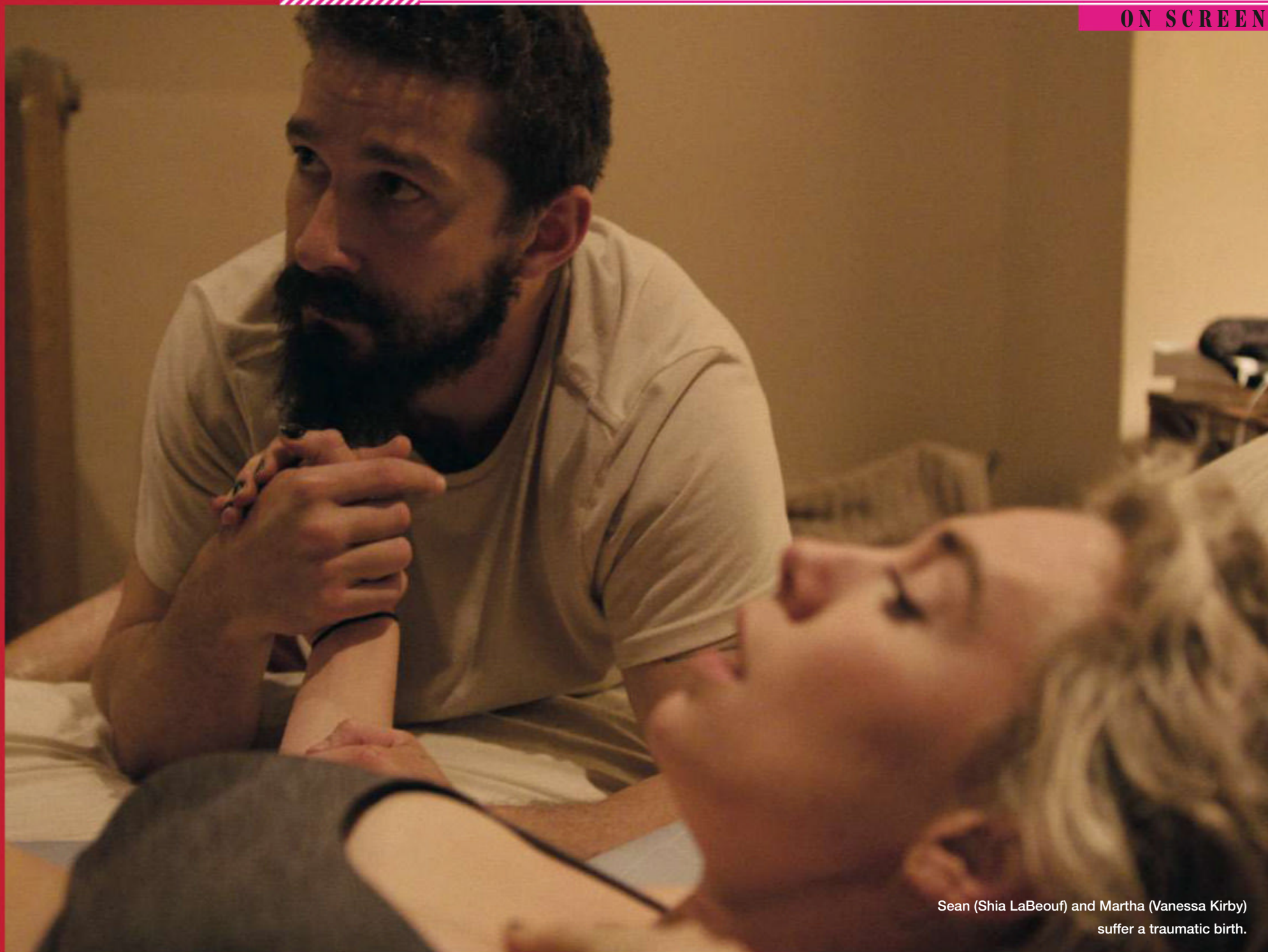
★★★★

OUT NOW (DIGITAL) / CERT 12 / 102 MINS

DIRECTOR Clea DuVall

CAST Mackenzie Davis, Kristen Stewart, Alison Brie

Harper (Mackenzie Davis) and Abby (Kristen Stewart) are visiting Harper's family for Christmas — Abby is planning on proposing, but Harper hasn't told her family she's gay. Clea DuVall directs a comedy full of wit, love and depth, as Abby wrestles with keeping Harper's secret from her eccentric family (from co-writer Mary Holland's peppy Jane to Alison Brie as the acerbic Sloane) and, naturally, the truth spills out. A sharp script and some loveable performances elevate the cosy framework into something more complex and moving. An ode to impossible expectations, bravery and loyalty, *Happiest Season* wraps up everything you could want for Christmas in a neat, thoughtful little bow. **EK**



Sean (Shia LaBeouf) and Martha (Vanessa Kirby) suffer a traumatic birth.

[FILM]

PIECES OF A WOMAN

★★★★

OUT 30 DECEMBER (CINEMAS) /
7 JANUARY (NETFLIX)
CERT TBC / 126 MINS

DIRECTOR Kornél Mundruczó

CAST Vanessa Kirby, Shia LaBeouf, Ellen Burstyn, Molly Parker, Benny Safdie, Iliza Shlesinger

PLOT Bostonians Martha (Kirby) and Sean (LaBeouf) are expecting their first child. After tragedy strikes during their home birth, Martha becomes isolated and frozen in her grief — not just from Sean, but her entire family. Will prosecuting her midwife help her find her way back — if not to them, to herself?

IT'S SEPTEMBER, AND construction engineer Sean (Shia LaBeouf) and his partner Martha (Vanessa Kirby) are preparing for the birth of their first child. Banners at the baby shower proclaim "It's a girl", before the couple head to pick up a car bought for them by Martha's domineering mother Elizabeth (Ellen Burstyn). There are signs of unease between the three: the thwack of Elizabeth's cheque book immediately denting Sean's masculinity ("She wants to

emasculate me," he says when she chooses a minivan); Martha's shoulders perceptibly tightening and locking as her mother's silent disapproval sours the air between them.

These issues don't pale into insignificance with what comes next (though it's undoubtedly much, much worse). They're simply the kindling for the slow-burning fire that follows and looks to swallow them all whole.

Martha's labour is set to be a routine home birth. But when it starts, the midwife can't come — she's in the middle of a heavy labour with another woman — and a replacement arrives (Molly Parker). Martha howls, bucks, growls and swears in a 24-minute childbirth one-shot that comes close to body horror. Shot with a gimbal, rather than a handheld, it doesn't have the frenetic, jumpy movement of a horror film, but it does have the intensity and immersive feel of one, and that's not all it shares with the genre. There's a shot of Martha's limp arm draped over the side of the bathtub unmoving, her disembodied moans out of sight; foretelling looks between characters; creaking, creeping tension that moves to a galloping intensity that's at times unbearable and almost unwatchable.

On the other side of this scene, in its wake, the film changes gear, tone and intent. Tragedy has struck, and if that half an hour was all about action, this is all about inaction; the paralysis in the wintry depths of grief. A grief that hasn't

just unmoored Martha from Sean, but from her mother too, who seems only concerned with seeing the midwife prosecuted.

While Sean (a remarkable LaBeouf) wears his agony on the outside — returning to cocaine, cigarettes and booze to escape — Martha turns entirely in on herself. She's numb and stripped raw, every nerve end alive with pain. A characterisation built from such seeming contradictions is entirely deliberate in performance, writing and direction. It's the reality of a pain, a situation, so gigantic, illogical and *impossible* that you break completely just attempting to withstand it. And Kirby here is nothing short of breathtaking. The film, when it stutters, does so partly because there is not yet a language that exists for this subject in cinema. It's brutal and uncommunicable, and all you're left with is silence and absence.

It's a silence that director Kornél Mundruczó and writer and partner Kata Wéber — who share a "film by" credit — wrestle with, not always entirely successfully. Cue a soapy courtroom scene and some heavy-handed symbolism which doesn't quite fit the austere, stark grammar and power of the rest of the film. **TERRI WHITE**

VERDICT Vanessa Kirby and Shia LaBeouf put in career-best performances in this crisp, fluent take on unimaginable trauma.



Clockwise from main: Millie (Kathryn Newton) and the Butcher (Vince Vaughn) swap bodies; The Butcher gets murderous; Nyla (Celeste O'Connor, left) and Josh (Misha Osherovich) with the all-new Millie.

[FILM]

FREAKY



OUT 26 DECEMBER
CERT 15 / 103 MINS

DIRECTOR Christopher Landon

CAST Vince Vaughn, Kathryn Newton, Misha Osherovich, Celeste O'Connor

PLOT High-schooler Millie Kessler (Newton) falls foul of serial killer the Blissfield Butcher (Vaughn), only to awaken inhabiting the killer's body. With 24 hours to reverse the curse, Millie must corner the killer and prevent him from using her own body to wreak havoc at Blissfield High.

CHRISTOPHER LANDON IS, it seems, on a mission to inject some fun back into the horror genre. After the peppy but predictable *Scouts Guide To The Zombie Apocalypse*, the director struck comedy-horror paydirt with 2017's *Happy Death Day* and its equally cheeky sequel. His latest, *Freaky*, doubles down on that formula, dialling up both gags and gore to deliver an unashamedly silly splatter-fest that extracts great mileage from a very simple premise.

Filmed under the title *Freaky Friday 13th*

(potential trademark infringement being the real terror of this story), Landon's film wears its influences with pride. Beginning with a viscera-strewn prologue in which Vaughn's towering Butcher dispatches a house full of horny teens, we're treated to an array of squirm-inducing kills that more than earn the film's 15 rating within the first five minutes. Obscured by a tribal not-hockey mask, the Butcher brings bloody mayhem with items ranging from tennis racquet to toilet seat, all with tongue placed firmly in cheek and shot through with a wicked sense of pitch-black humour. Crafting a film that's gory but never grim, Landon commits early to rolling out the Vor-hee-hees, before setting up Blissfield High as a very camp Crystal Lake.

The film's (knowingly daft) plot is served by a MacGuffin in the form of a natty-looking Aztec dagger, which proves ideal for teenage evisceration but also happens to carry an ancient curse. Once the blade is used upon an imperilled Millie (Kathryn Newton) after the school homecoming game (the sight of her fleeing her would-be killer in a giant beaver suit is one for the ages), the film's bloody body-swap kicks into gear.

It's easy to forget how gifted a comedian Vince Vaughn is from his more recent output (neither *Dragged Across Concrete* nor *Brawl In Cell Block 99* notable for being giggle-a-minute lol-fests). After a number of years spent playing



it straight, Vaughn hurls himself into the role of *Freaky*'s disembodied co-ed with unabashed glee. On scene-stealing form, he slips seamlessly into Millie's high-school upspeak, flirts with her class crush, busts out a cheerleading routine and gleefully discovers the joy of a stand-up wee ("You gotta see this — it's like a floppy anteater!"). It's a hugely enjoyably performance from which Vaughn holds absolutely nothing back. Ably backed by Millie's two sassy BFFs (Misha Osherovich and Celeste O'Connor, who both



shine in the roles), Vaughn mines every ounce of absurdity from a 6'5" man with the mannerisms of a teenage girl, bouncing off his co-stars in a manner that's both consistently funny and disarmingly believable.

Newton is almost as effective as the glowering killer, who does his level best to continue the bloodbath while only occasionally being interrupted by Millie's mother for being late for school. As Millie's murderous alter-ego reinvents his host as a leather-jacket-wearing badass, the film takes on the guise of a twisted high-school *Pygmalion* ("She's All Axe?"). Embracing a perverse schadenfreude, the story delights in allowing 'Millie' to take homicidal revenge on everyone from the school bully to the leering jocks. Even the faculty isn't immune to Killie Millie's wrath, as her abusive CDT teacher (a superbly hissable Alan Ruck) discovers to his detriment.

An overwhelming air of silly exuberance largely makes up for the flimsy plotting, though some of the character moments ring out bum notes. Millie's role as emotional caregiver to her alcoholic mother feels overwrought, and a bonding scene between Vaughn-as-Millie and Mrs Kessler in a department-store changing room struggles to feel honest or believable. And while Landon takes pains to flesh out Millie's home life, he makes no such effort with the Butcher himself, content to have him all but materialise out of urban myth and inhabit the role of motiveless, malignant bogeyman — even Jason had a mother!

The sub-*Scream* trope-awareness may be a touch smug for some ("You're Black, I'm gay — we're so dead!"), but the film's arch cheekiness is much of its appeal. Landon once again succeeds in pulling off a highly effective scary movie that's also buckets of fun. It doesn't elevate the formula quite as effectively as the *Happy Death Day* movies, but *Freaky* is far more than just the sum of its murderous set-pieces. A fresh, funny and thrilling addition to the year's horror pantheon. **JAMES DYER**

VERDICT While not quite on a par with *Happy Death Day*, *Freaky* is an ebullient slasher that strikes a perfect balance of comedy and carnage.

Tessa Thompson and Nnamdi Asomugha star in the 1960s-set period drama.



[FILM]

SYLVIE'S LOVE



OUT NOW (PRIME VIDEO) /
CERT TBC / 110 MINS

DIRECTOR Eugene Ashe

CAST Tessa Thompson, Nnamdi Asomugha, Aja Naomi King

PLOT Five years after they fell in love in 1957, a chance encounter sees jazz musician Robert (Asomugha) reconnect with aspiring TV producer Sylvie (Thompson). But will their new circumstances keep them from a second chance at a happily ever after?

A PERIOD DRAMA with Black people at its centre is usually a guarantee that race and bigotry will be the dominant factors of the story. There is value in the *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Selmas*, of course, but it's disheartening that there hasn't been nearly as many movies set way back when that focus on Black characters pursuing love, happiness and career dreams. That's a big reason why *Sylvie's Love* — a charming sophomore effort from writer-director Eugene Ashe that puts the emphasis on a swoon-worthy romance to joyous effect — feels so refreshing.

The two star-crossed lovers in question are the titular Sylvie (Tessa Thompson) and Robert (Nnamdi Asomugha, likeably understated), a reserved but brilliant saxophonist in a jazz quartet. The latter gets a job at the record store where Sylvie works just to be near her, and their shared musical passions give way to cute flirtations that quickly blossom into something more. That we're rooting for the couple from the outset even though Sylvie is technically engaged (a fact she oft-repeats) is a sign of the easy chemistry Asomugha and Thompson share.

Of all the obstacles placed in the

relationship's path, the push and pull between love and career is where Ashe's screenplay finds the most potent drama, one of many reasons why *Sylvie's Love* would make for an excellent double bill with *La La Land*. In what is a welcome bit of revisionism, the woman's career is given just as much story importance as the man's, which helps to reinforce the idea that the title doesn't just refer to the men in Sylvie's life, but to herself. The more she comes into her own, the more magnetic Thompson's performance becomes.

She's helped by some stunning costume design from *Mad Men*'s Phoenix Mellow, and similar can be said for *Sylvie's Love*'s impressive aesthetics. In addition to being shot in lush 16mm, Mayne Berke Thompson's production design has just the right amount of detail-oriented vintage, and the original jazz music written by Fabrice Lecomte meshes well with a soundtrack that includes Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson, and Martha Reeves & The Vandellas.

There are, though, some familiar criticisms of romance stories: not only is this a narrative with few surprises en route to its conclusion, but some of the turns the story takes are farfetched and far too coincidental. It all contributes to a running time that ends up feeling a little longer than it should.

But there's much more about *Sylvie's Love* that feels radical. Although the bigotry of the era isn't completely absent from the proceedings — a dinner party sequence features the film's lone microaggression, while the campaigning for Civil Rights is represented by Aja Naomi King's underused Mona — this is a period movie that puts Black love first and foremost. There's value in that, too. **AMON WARMANN**

VERDICT Combining beautiful aesthetics with winning performances from Thompson and Asomugha, *Sylvie's Love* is the rare Black period drama that tells a sweet and satisfying love story without revolving around the racial adversity of the era.

ON SCREEN

Is anybody there? Judi Dench plays a spiritualist medium.



[FILM]

BLITHE SPIRIT



OUT 15 JANUARY
(CINEMAS / SKY CINEMA)
CERT TBC / 96 MINS

DIRECTOR Edward Hall

CAST Dan Stevens, Isla Fisher, Leslie Mann, Judi Dench

PLOT In 1930s England, crime novelist Charles (Stevens) is struck by writer's block. He turns to a medium (Dench), who unexpectedly summons up the ghost of his first wife (Mann). She gives Charles the inspiration he craves but causes supernatural friction with his exasperated current wife Ruth (Fisher).

THE TIME SEEMS apt for another revival of *Blithe Spirit*, with the popular resurgence of mystical practices from tarot-reading to sage-burning and witchcraft — all of which get a run-out, and a little send-up, in this 1937-set romp. Frequently revived on stage and most famously adapted for the screen by David Lean in 1945, Noël Coward's play is a deathless comedy about mortality, creativity and sex. However, this new film, directed by Edward Hall (a veteran of theatre and prestige TV including *Downton Abbey* and *Spooks*), trades much of Coward's wit and dramatic restraint for a story with a broader scope and broader laughs.

What makes the film tick, when it ticks, is a charmingly deranged lead performance from Dan Stevens, tweeded up to the nines and rattling around a gorgeous Art Deco mansion in the Home Counties. He plays Charles, a writer with a stack of successful detective novels to his name who is labouring through an alcoholic haze to translate one of them into a screenplay. Isla Fisher pouts and essays a gabbled, cut-glass accent in an

enthusiastic but unfocused performance as his wife, who is losing patience with his literary procrastination and his underperformance in the bedroom.

At first it's not clear whether it's the booze, the Benzedrine he pops to lift his libido, or the seance on a stormy night overseen by unconvincing medium Madame Arcati (a very welcome if underwhelming Judi Dench), but soon Charles is visited by the spectre of his dead first wife Elvira (a capricious, camp Leslie Mann, who fails to wring quite enough laughs from what should be the juiciest role in the film). Dench's Arcati is an unexpectedly plaintive figure, baffled by her own spiritualist success and lost in her own grief, who seems to belong to another film entirely. Meanwhile, with Elvira and her knack for storytelling back on the scene, Charles' manuscript falls into shape — but Ruth is further incensed by the ghostly platinum-blond cuckoo in her nest.

It's a monstrous ménage à trois, and the 1930s decor and chic costumes all add to the fun (especially when Elvira starts chucking the beautiful Clarice Cliff crockery around), but it's unclear why the period setting was retained when so much of the original has been jettisoned in favour of plot complications and a detour to Hollywood. The biggest laughs here spring from the timeless pleasures of violent slapstick or sniggering innuendo, while the references to Wallis Simpson and Greta Garbo seem forced.

As supernatural affairs go, *Blithe Spirit* is oddly sparse with the special effects too — it's easy to forget, while Elvira and Charles are sinking cocktails in the Savoy, that they don't share the same "astral plane". Ultimately, this fleshed-out fantasy is neither as funny, as fierce nor as fearsome as the source material.

PAMELA HUTCHINSON

VERDICT Main character Charles isn't the only one struggling with the art of movie adaptation. This *Blithe Spirit* dilutes the original's heady cocktail, serving up a sugary punch rather than a dry martini.



LOCAL HERO

Each month, *Empire* puts a much-loved indie picture house in the spotlight

HOME

Creative Director: Film & Culture Jason Wood on the joy of Manchester's multi-faceted favourite
HOMEMCR.ORG

What's the history?

Manchester's Library Theatre and [cinema and art gallery] Cornerhouse merged and HOME was the result. We moved into a new multi-arts venue in 2015 with cinema, theatre and gallery spaces. We try to make the spaces work together, like when David Lynch did a takeover. He sent us his artwork to display, he curated a theatre programme and we showed his films in the cinema.

What's special about your cinema?

It's a really inclusive space, a venue for people from all walks of life — a place where people come to be entertained as well as stimulated.

We have an accessibility scheme to encourage people from more economically challenged backgrounds to visit us: we very much want to be a place for all.

Share a memorable moment.

Holding the UK premiere of Mike Leigh's *Peterloo* was a huge moment for us, especially because it was the first time a film in the London Film Festival had premiered outside of London. For a director of his stature to hold that here felt incredible.

How does the community play a role?

Really good art venues are community venues and that's what we try to be. We work with many groups who do regular takeovers. We try to get our community involved via our Q&A events with filmmakers too.

What plans are you making for the future?

We're hoping to continue delivering an online offering alongside physical showings because higher-risk groups continue to face challenges. People wanted to come back not only to support us, but to enjoy that shared experience of cinema.

ELIZABETH AUBREY



SING ME A SONG

★★★★

OUT 1 JANUARY / CERT PG / 99 MINS

DIRECTOR Thomas Balmès

PARTICIPANTS Peyangki, Ugyen

Documentarian Thomas Balmès returns with a compelling sort-of sequel to 2013's *Happiness*, revisiting boy monk Peyangki ten years after that film. In the decade since, the internet has reached his remote Bhutanese village of Laya and changed its inhabitants in profound ways. Now the boyish monks play games on their phones even as they chant their mantras, and exchange video messages with girls in the capital of Thimphu. With the world thus at their fingertips, the appeal of their austere village life seems to fade. In Balmès' eyes, they gain little from these new technologies and nowhere near enough to compensate for what they — and all of us — lose, so that a deep sense of despair colours the film's last act. It may seem harsh on modern life, but the personal sense of tragedy makes his case. **HOH**



STARDUST

★★

OUT 15 JANUARY / CERT TBC / 109 MINS

DIRECTOR Gabriel Range

CAST Johnny Flynn, Jena Malone, Marc Maron

David Bowie never even gave permission for a written biography of his life, let alone a cinematic biopic, so *Stardust* inevitably arrives under a cloud of unauthorised controversy. As Bowie, Johnny Flynn seems like smart casting on paper: in films like *Beast*, he has shown a kind of extra-terrestrial charisma, and in his other career as a folk singer, he has proven musical chops. But he feels miscast here, too distant from Bowie's slight, androgynous frame and lumbered with a script that clumsily attempts to grapple with Bowie's endless ch-ch-changes. For a film about such a famously imaginative artist, it feels curiously flat, and suffers badly from the total absence of his back catalogue; watching this, you'd think Bowie was merely a middling covers singer with a penchant for terrible mimes. **JN**



EDUCATION

★★★★

OUT NOW (BBC iPLAYER) / CERT N/A / 65 MINS

DIRECTOR Steve McQueen

CAST Kenyah Sandy, Sharlene Whyte, Daniel Francis

Set in '70s London, the final part of Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* anthology sees 12-year-old Kingsley (Kenyah Sandy, mesmerising) lit up by big dreams of being an astronaut. But his starry-eyed ambition must overcome claims that "you can't have a Black man in space", and difficulty in reading shunts him to an 'educationally subnormal' school — basically a dumping ground for Black kids with educational needs. McQueen's own experience of being dyslexic yet gifted looms in this fictional story festering in home truths. *Education* schools us to where racism lies within the history of teaching and duly nods to Grenadian writer and politician Bernard Coard's 1971 pamphlet enlightening Black parents on how schools were failing their kids. **CA**



ALEX WHEATLE

★★★★

OUT NOW (BBC iPLAYER) / CERT N/A / 64 MINS

DIRECTOR Steve McQueen

CAST Sheyi Cole, Robbie Gee, Jonathan Jules

United by their themes of British institutional racism, each *Small Axe* feature has focused on deliberately paved-over aspects of this country's history, its hatred viewed as mere anomalies. *Alex Wheatle* is about the need to unlearn this perspective, making sense of the present by remembering the past. Though grand in scope, the film maintains the series' intimate focus by centring it around Wheatle (and 1981's Brixton Uprising) and his ongoing pain from having been stranded in white-dominated environments such as the social services system. While it's more sprawling than the others, it's also the strongest character piece, its coming-of-age and process of unlearning the dogma of England's white upper classes told with riveting emotivity and clarity. **KC**



DREAMLAND

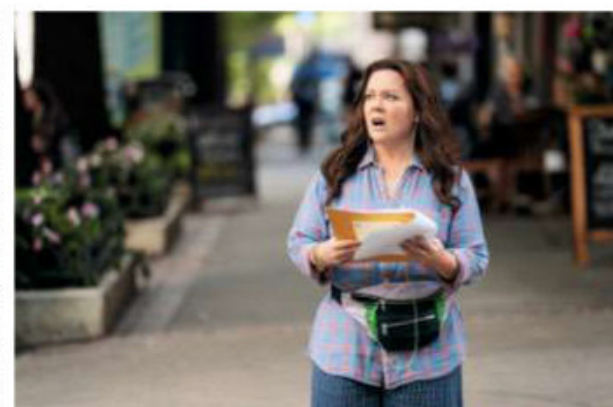
★★★

OUT NOW / CERT 15 / 98 MINS

DIRECTOR Miles Joris-Peyrafitte

CAST Finn Cole, Margot Robbie, Travis Fimmel

There's nothing in *Dreamland* that you haven't seen a million times before. A mismatched pair gradually bonding while on the run from the cops was done as recently as earlier this year, with *Queen & Slim*. And the period setting evokes — deliberately — *Bonnie & Clyde*. There's even a little *E.T.* in its principal hook of gentle young Eugene (Finn Cole) beguiled by entrancing, alluring stowaway Allison (Margot Robbie), a wounded bank robber who has taken refuge in his outbuildings. However, while there isn't much in the way of surprises in Miles Joris-Peyrafitte's movie, it's shot beautifully (kudos to DP Lyle Vincent), while Cole and Robbie (who also produced) work hard to make their unlikely entanglement motor along on an emotional level. **CH**



SUPERINTELLIGENCE

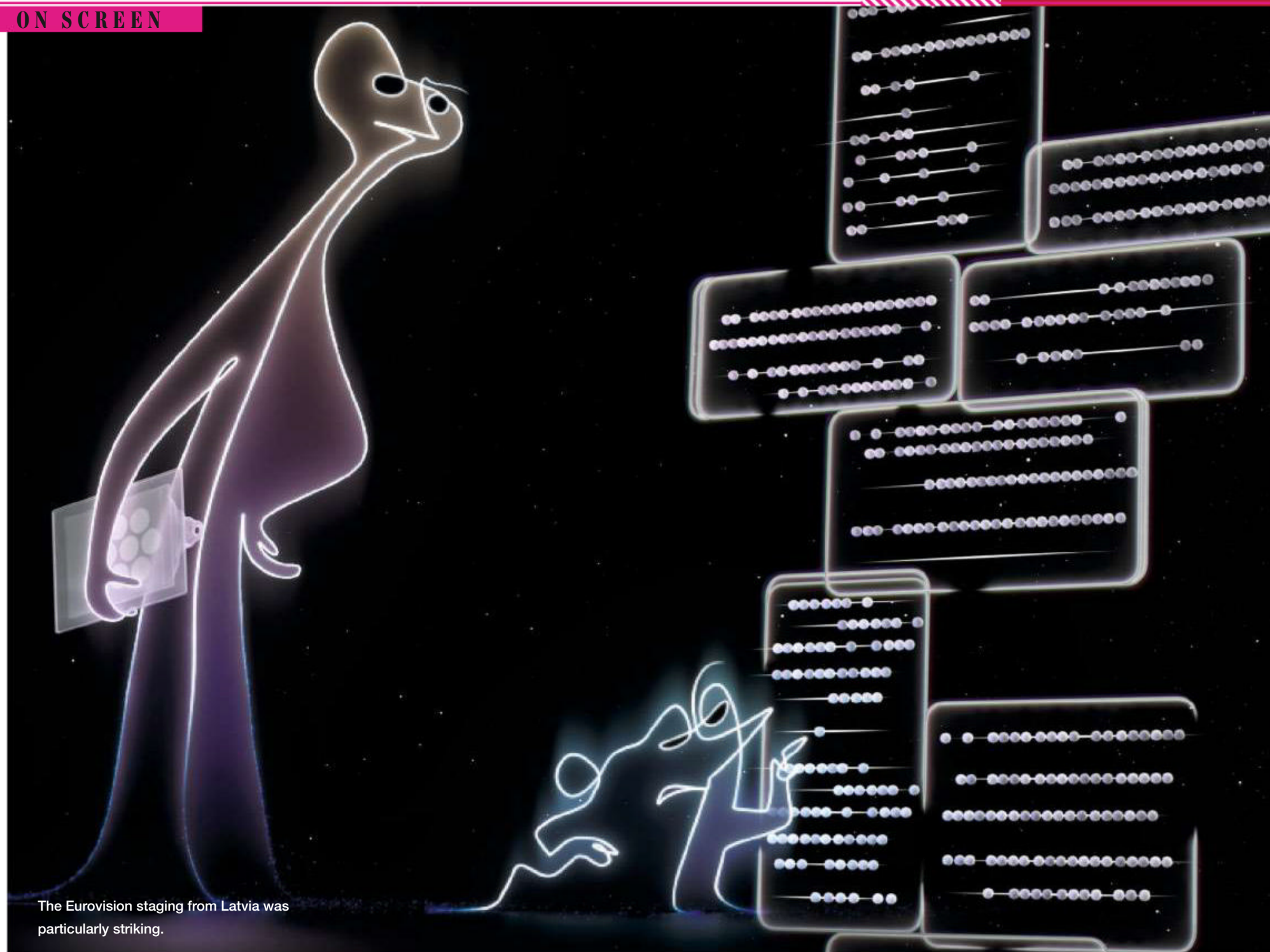
★★

OUT NOW / CERT PG / 106 MINS

DIRECTOR Ben Falcone

CAST Melissa McCarthy, Bobby Cannavale, Brian Tyree Henry

Aiming to mix technological musings (a super-intelligent AI picks Melissa McCarthy's "average person" as the basis for its decision to save, enslave or destroy humanity) with wacky comedy (McCarthy's Carol Peters is her usual offbeat character), *Superintelligence* is torn between two concepts that rarely connect. The high points are the lead's easy chemistry with Bobby Cannavale, as the lost love with whom the AI (voiced by James Corden) tries to reunite her, and some amusing support from the likes of Brian Tyree Henry and Jean Smart. Looking to score more of a family audience than their raunchier efforts, McCarthy and Falcone miss the mark when it comes to finding the right level. What you're left with is *Black Mirror* with a lot less grey matter **JW**



The Eurovision staging from Latvia was particularly striking.

[FILM]

SOUL



OUT 25 DECEMBER (DISNEY+)
CERT PG / 100 MINS

DIRECTORS Pete Docter, Kemp Powers

CAST (VOICES) Jamie Foxx, Tina Fey, Richard Ayoade, Angela Bassett

PLOT Finally getting a big break, jazz musician and teacher Joe Gardner (Foxx) then falls down a manhole. On the verge of death, he finds himself in The Great Before, a place where souls are assigned personalities. From there, he finds himself embarking on an even more unexpected journey.

AN EVER-CHANGING genre mish-mash, *Soul* is an unpredictable box of curveballs, mixing slapstick and sentimentality with big ideas. Generally there are two types of Pixar films — the ones that are *really* for the kids, and then the ones for all of us, the ones that plug away at more philosophical concerns. Early on, a character here straight-up explains something about “all quantised themes of the universe”. Nobody said that in *Cars 3*.

When Joe (Jamie Foxx), a jazzier from

Queens, New York, who’s never quite made it tries out as a pianist for legendary singer/band-leader Dorothea Williams (Angela Bassett) and impresses her, he’s so beside himself with joy that he doesn’t even see the manhole he plunges into. As it turns out, though, he’s not *quite* dead. Escaping the imminent crossover into The Great Beyond, he instead escapes into The Great Before, a celestial Nirvana where unborn souls which look like little baby ghosts are assigned personalities. There, mentors are assigned to souls that need a little help to give them the impetus they need to truly live. Joe finds himself lumbered with soul 22 (Tina Fey), who just wants to stay where she is.

Just as he did in *Inside Out* Pete Docter — accompanied this time by co-director Kemp Powers — delights in the mechanics of how an imagined system might actually work, and once again it’s a wry exploration. The counsellors resemble glow-in-the-dark Picasso drawings, used to clever effect, especially when one of them arrives in New York, ingeniously camouflaging himself in a subway station. The human character design is even more wonderful, full of so much nuanced personality they tell stories in an instant. In a Christmas carol-tinged sequence, New York is also gloriously lived-in, which is fitting for a film that’s an ode to life.

For all its vision, though, it’s a little Pixar-lite. It’s a gorgeous 100 minutes, but not

a huge emotional journey. The stakes seem strangely low, all things considered, without the big, weepy gut-punches you might hope for, certainly of the potency that Docter’s unleashed in *Up* and *Inside Out*. Despite an overriding theme that’s set up from the start, the different worlds don’t quite gel — Joe and 22 team up, but their partnership jars, and at times it feels like three films in one, which makes for some tonal zig-zags. For such big ideas, it’s surprisingly slight.

Still, it’s rewarding. The scenes between Joe and Dorothea are so spirited, as are the moments with him and his mother (Phylicia Rashad). This is the first Pixar film with a Black character as the lead, and African-American co-director Powers’ influence permeates it all: it is so richly realised, so keenly felt. There are some transcendental moments in this film, moments where the narrative so perfectly hits the animation, and you get swept away in it — witness Joe having a revelatory moment on a train, hazy neon through a steamy window. This is the Pixar magic. And in those moments, everything makes sense. **ALEX GODFREY**

VERDICT While not quite offering the emotional impact it promises, its many ideas never completely cohering, *Soul* is nevertheless a gorgeous and tender existential trip. It’s full of surprises.



ROSE ISLAND

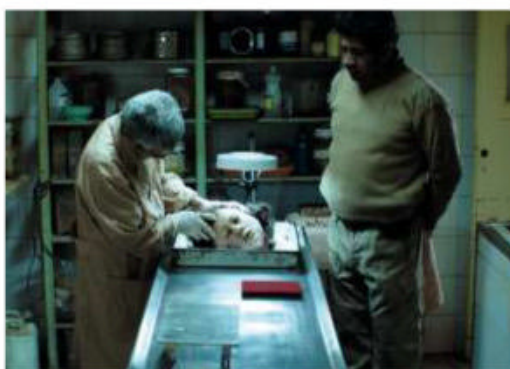
★★★

OUT NOW (NETFLIX) / CERT 12 / 118 MINS

DIRECTOR Sydney Sibilia

CAST Elio Germano, Matilda de Angelis, Leonardo Lidi

There is something of the spirit of Ealing comedies in *Rose Island*. To live by his own rules, lovelorn engineer Giorgio (Elio Germano) decides to construct his own steel island in neutral waters off the coast of Rimini. While it proves a destination for hedonists, it also raises the ire of the Italian government as Giorgio applies for his haven to become an independent state. It's predictable and gets bogged down in too many scenes depicting bureaucratic red tape, but Germano makes for a winning dreamer and Sydney Sibilia's film is shot through with infectious optimism. Unlike its hero, the film takes few risks, but *Rose Island* is a colourful, enchanting and entertaining space to stay for a couple of hours. **IF**



MURDER ME, MONSTER

★★★

OUT NOW (DIGITAL) / CERT TBC / 110 MINS

DIRECTOR Alejandro Fadel

CAST Victor Lopez, Esteban Bigliardi, Jorge Prado

From its opening shot — a woman with a slit throat securing her head to her neck while surrounded by sheep — Alejandro Fadel's police-procedural/monster mash-up is both surreal and intense. In outline it sounds straightforward fun: rural Argentinian cop Cruz (Victor Lopez) investigates a series of beheadings where the chief suspect (Esteban Bigliardi) believes he is telepathically connected to a killer monster. But Fadel never takes the easy route, opting for elliptical plotting and funereal pace and rendering it incomprehensible. Still, the monster is a hoot, a del Toro-esque creation with a vagina for a face, and the film drips with enough dread to make you wonder what a simpler approach might have delivered. **IF**



The cast hadn't quite mastered the art of doing jazz-hands.

[FILM]

THE PROM

★★★

OUT NOW (CINEMAS/NETFLIX)

CERT 12 / 132 MINUTES

DIRECTOR Ryan Murphy

STARRING Meryl Streep, James Corden, Jo Ellen Pellman, Ariana DeBose, Nicole Kidman, Andrew Rannells, Keegan-Michael Key, Kerry Washington

PLOT Lesbian high-schooler Emma (Pellman) plans to attend her prom with a girl, so the head of the PTA shuts it down. Enter failing Broadway stars Dee Dee (Streep) and Barry (Corden) in search of positive publicity...

IN RECENT YEARS, there's been a spate of musicals that you'll enjoy 'even if you don't like musicals', like *Hamilton* with its astonishing word-wizardry, or the retro-cool *La La Land*. *The Prom* is no such musical. It is intensely, unabashedly, razzlingly, dazzlingly Broadway, a musical for people who love musicals, in which many of the songs are *about* musicals. Anyone allergic to such things need not apply.

For everyone else, Ryan Murphy's first feature as director since *Eat Pray Love* offers an eye-poppingly vibrant finale to a grim year. *The Prom* — with its ultra-stylish glossy aesthetic, penchant for high kitsch, legendary actresses chewing the scenery, and centring of LGBTQ+ narratives — ticks multiple boxes of the Murphy oeuvre. Every scene sparkles, each surface shimmers, and block-colours dominate the frame.

Leading the way is a starry showbiz cast gleefully playing a bunch of narcissistic luvvies. Meryl Streep and James Corden are Dee Dee Allen and Barry Glickman, whose new Eleanor Roosevelt musical lands dire reviews ("What did they not like? Was it the hip-hop?" asks Barry in a *Hamilton* dig). In response, they plot with fellow

thespians Angie Dickinson (Nicole Kidman) and Trent Oliver (Andrew Rannells) to become celebrity activists and earn some positive press, travelling to Edgewater, Indiana, to help openly gay student Emma (Jo Ellen Pellman), whose desire to attend her prom as part of a same-sex couple has sparked uproar from the local community. "We're gonna help that little lesbian, whether she likes it or not!" sings Glickman.

It's clear all involved are having a blast. Streep in particular camps it up something royal as the deluded Dee Dee, while Kidman quite literally struts into frame in a bright-green sequinned gown for her grand entrance. Corden playing effeminate camp might wrinkle some noses, but Barry is a relentlessly entertaining character, firing out non-stop zingers.

This, though, is Emma's story, and she gets lost in the mix. Newcomer Jo Ellen Pellman is charming, but the character feels thin, the script hinting at horrifying hardships she's endured without creating space to explore them. In fact, a lack of depth is *The Prom*'s biggest issue — after a riotous Act One, the second half becomes baggy and unfocused, and the depiction of the town's intolerant values feels overly simplistic. Ultimately, *The Prom* is better at satirically skewering Broadway than it is at seriously skewering homophobia, which feels like a missed opportunity.

Still, you'll root for Emma to end up with Alyssa (Ariana DeBose) come the rousing finale, which visualises the more diverse and inclusive world we could all be living in if bigotry didn't rear its ugly head. Ultimately, that's Murphy's entire *raison d'être* as a creator — and, as ever, he delivers it in one hell of a show. Not quite a standing ovation, but a big bravo. **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT *The Prom* is a loud, proud glitterball of a film, and doesn't pretend to be anything else. It stumbles in the second half and the relentless cheer is a little exhausting, but its energy and wit remain infectious.



[FILM]

ONE NIGHT IN MIAMI



OUT 26 DECEMBER
CERT 15 / 110 MINS

DIRECTOR Regina King

CAST Kingsley Ben-Adir, Eli Goree, Aldis Hodge, Leslie Odom Jr

PLOT On 25 February 1964, 22-year-old boxer Cassius Clay (Goree) celebrated a win with three friends: Nation of Islam leader Malcolm X (Ben-Adir), NFL legend Jim Brown (Hodge) and soul singer Sam Cooke (Odom Jr). All four were at a crossroads, and the conversations they had would be transformative.

THERE'S THE HISTORY that's recorded by news cameras, witnessed by crowds or noted down in official documents. And then there's everything else that's ever happened. It's in this vast, "inspired by true events..." space that *One Night In Miami* exists, first as an award-winning play, now a movie, and all of it rooted in a historical fact that once tickled writer Kemp Powers. After winning the World Heavyweight Championship in February 1964, Muhammad Ali (then still Cassius Clay) didn't hit the town to pop champagne, as might be imagined. He returned to his hotel and spent a quiet evening talking to friends and eating ice cream.

A regular pyjama party! Well, not quite, since these friends were hardly anonymous also-rans. The coming together of Ali (Eli Goree), Jim Brown (Aldis Hodge), Sam Cooke (Leslie Odom Jr) and Malcolm X (Kingsley Ben-Adir) is the *Avengers Assemble* of civil rights-era Black excellence, deriving its dramatic potential from

each man's individual status during what was a pivotal time for them all.

Clay, as well as ascending to be the all-time greatest boxer, was preparing to renounce his slave name and announce his conversion to Islam. Cooke was a money-making pop sensation with a suppressed ambition to use his artistry for activism. Jim Brown was increasingly uncomfortable with the position of Black athletes in American culture ("We're all just gladiators, Cass, with our ruler sitting up there in the box"); and Malcolm X, under constant FBI surveillance, was already anticipating his own assassination. Within a year, both he and Cooke would be dead.

One Night In Miami's two-fold task, then, is to chime with our internalised images of icons, while also getting at a reality far beyond it. Nobody knows what those four public figures discussed in the privacy of that hotel room, but Kemp Powers certainly has a feel for it. Alongside Pixar's animated feature *Soul*, this is



Clockwise from left: Icons' night out; Cassius Clay (Eli Goree) starts his journey to being The Greatest; You know he's got soul: Leslie Odom Jr as Sam Cooke.

the second film of 2020 to prove his ability to pull off astonishing imaginative feats rooted in his own life experience. The dialogue — sometimes brotherly, sometimes barbed, often both — will ring true to anyone who's ever sat up late putting the world to rights. And the topics of conversation — courage, compromise and the social responsibilities of success — remain relevant to the ongoing struggle for what Malcolm X called simply “human rights”.

Kemp's script, as illuminating and plausible as it is, could have played like a tawdry parlour seance without the right performers. Still, it's also possible to overstate the “casting challenge” involved in finding actors who both physically resemble these much-photographed men and have the talent to embody them. As a series of groundbreaking films has recently clarified, there is no lack of talented young Black actors; it's the *opportunities* that have been lacking.

This opportunity has been enthusiastically

seized by the entire cast, although Goree's rambunctious recreation of Ali's humour and rhythmic patter deserves special mention. As you'd expect from a woman who only last year took home the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress, Regina King's direction allows actors space to do their best work, even within the confined proportions of a hotel room. Indeed, this collaboration has successfully transformed the unavoidable stage-bound quality of theatre-to-screen adaptations into a powerful metaphor for the segregated South. Even Black men as fêted as these four are unable to move around as they please.

King's director credit is significant in another way too. To have a Black woman at the film's helm makes a kind of presence of Black women's near-total absence within the story itself. It feels like a tacit acknowledgement that while progress toward a fuller representation of our diverse humanity continues, American cinema has not yet arrived at a place where it's

possible to grapple with civil-rights heroes in all their human complexity. Now is not the time to contemplate how a man might be at once a great leader and a serial philanderer, a neglectful father or a domestic abuser. But we'll get there.

One film can't tell all the stories and *One Night In Miami* doesn't try. While historical drama typically deals in epic swathes of time, allowing a vantage point on MLK's “bend toward justice”, the focus on a single evening illustrates an equally profound truth: working for change in the world means accepting the likelihood that you won't live to see better days, but still believing that — as Brother Sam sang — change is gonna come. **ELLEN E JONES**

VERDICT This feels like history-in-the-making, as both a fresh insight into the interior lives of historical figures and a snapshot of a future filmmaking great just getting started.



Left to right: George Clooney, George Clooney's beard, Caoilinn Springall.

[FILM]

THE MIDNIGHT SKY



OUT NOW (CINEMAS) /
23 DECEMBER (NETFLIX)
CERT 12A / 122 MINS

DIRECTOR George Clooney

CAST George Clooney, Felicity Jones, David Oyelowo, Kyle Chandler, Tiffany Booth, Demián Bichir, Caoilinn Springall

PLOT The year is 2049, and the Earth is toast. Three weeks after a devastating global “event” that has left the planet uninhabitable, reclusive scientist Augustine Lofthouse (George Clooney) races to stop a team of astronauts from returning, thereby accidentally dooming the future of the species.

IT OPENS WITH a man with a hefty grey beard, toiling in the Arctic to help humanity. So far, so *The Christmas Chronicles 2*. But unlike that other Netflix offering of this season, *The Midnight Sky* is a sombre, urgent affair. George Clooney’s seventh film as director, it adapts an elegiac 2016 novel by Lily Brooks-Dalton into a double-stranded sci-fi helix about planet Earth’s

last, desperate days. It cuts between a scientist down here trying to get a message into the sky and the inhabitants of the spacecraft he’s attempting to reach. And it’s by far Clooney’s most ambitious work behind the camera to date, not least as he had to toggle technical duties with maintaining that massive beard.

Half of the film sees him channelling both Iñárritu and DiCaprio, as he drops himself into a kind of polar spin on *The Revenant* (scripted by the writer of the actual *Revenant*, Mark L. Smith). Clooney’s sickly scientist Augustine Lofthouse (a character name that sounds like he should be getting upset about a gazebo in a P.G. Wodehouse novel) must trek through a blizzard, fend off wolves and face freezing waters, all the while looking after a mysterious young girl who has come into his orbit. Presumably there’s a deleted scene in which he wrestles a walrus. As director, Clooney whips up a convincingly bleak tundra. And Lofthouse is a glum but compelling character, stooped over with regrets but trudging forward with the determination of a man who knows he has one chance to finally make things right. A series of touching flashbacks fill in his backstory, with Ethan Peck (Gregory’s grandson) playing the younger Augustine and he and Clooney sharing the voice through some effective audio trickery.

The other half of the film is closer to *Gravity*, tracking a band of bewildered astronauts aboard a vessel called Aether as they inch closer to

Earth, wondering why they’re getting radio silence from home. Again, it’s technically impressive, and there are lovely moments, from a Neil Diamond space-walk sing-along to the sight of Kyle Chandler boxing a virtual-reality monkey. But while they’re played by a strong bunch of actors (also including Felicity Jones and David Oyelowo), the characters remain slightly thin, representations of the best qualities of humankind rather than living, breathing people. And a third-act, deep-space action sequence feels more like a Netflix note (“Now, we don’t want to go full *Solaris*, George”) than a necessary story beat.

The Midnight Sky is a big swing from Clooney. Just as *Suburbicon* took on racism and *The Ides Of March* had things to say about the American political process, this is a strong note of caution as to what the near future could look like if the environment is allowed to fester. Its disparate threads may not all quite tie together — and a big reveal near the end won’t be easily swallowed by everyone — but it’s still a moving tale, by turns muscular and poetic. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

VERDICT Swinging between ice and space, Clooney has upped his directorial ambition and delivered a big-scale, big-hearted story, even if it struggles to match the films it riffs on.



BLACK NARCISSUS

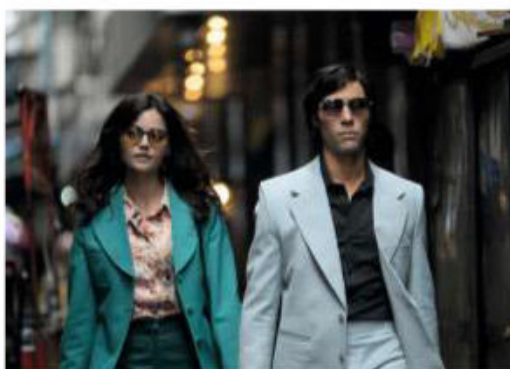
★★★

OUT 27 DECEMBER (BBC ONE, BBC iPLAYER) /
EPISODES VIEWED 3 OF 3

DIRECTOR Charlotte Bruus Christensen

CAST Gemma Arterton, Alessandro Nivola, Aisling Franciosi

It's a brave soul that takes on *Black Narcissus*. Powell & Pressburger's 1947 adaptation of Rumer Godden's nuns-go-crazy-in-the-Himalayas novel is a landmark in British cinema and this latest version doesn't do enough to differentiate itself. Where it scores is in its lead: Gemma Arterton is strong as Sister Clodagh, who comes under the spell of both a haunted palace and Alessandra Nivola's rakish Mr Dean. It's visually impressive but doesn't stake out new ground from the film version, slavishly cleaving to P&P's vision by almost re-running the famous belltower sequences shot for shot while never crafting its own heady atmosphere. **IF**



THE SERPENT

★★★★

OUT 1 JANUARY / BBC ONE, BBC iPLAYER /
EPISODES VIEWED 4 OF 8

SHOWRUNNERS Richard Warlow, Toby Finlay and Stephen Smallwood

CAST Tahar Rahim, Jenna Coleman, Billy Howle, Ellie Bamber

The Serpent is set in the mid '70s, and deliberately looks like it was made then, too. A meticulous dramatisation of the true story of murderer Charles Sobhraj (Tahar Rahim) and his partner Marie-Andrée Leclerc (Jenna Coleman), who preyed on western travellers along the "hippie trail" from India to Nepal, the series is filmed in the style of a vintage Robert Altman movie. The narrative cuts between Sobhraj coldly carrying out his crimes and the investigations of Herman Knippenberg (Billy Howle), a junior diplomat in Bangkok, whose search for the truth grips like one of those '70s conspiracy thrillers, too. **BH**



Stu (James Marsden)
ponders the pandemic.

[TV]

THE STAND

★★★

OUT 3 JANUARY (STARZPLAY)
EPISODES VIEWED 4 OF 9

SHOWRUNNERS Josh Boone, Benjamin Cavell

CAST James Marsden, Amber Heard, Greg Kinnear, Odessa Young, Alexander Skarsgård, Whoopi Goldberg

PLOT After a man-made plague takes out most of the population, a group of survivors, who share visions of prophet Mother Abigail (Goldberg), lead a community to Colorado. Yet they also dream of Randall Flagg (Skarsgård), a supernatural force with plans for destruction.

WHEN HE WROTE *The Stand* in 1978, Stephen King envisaged a novel that played like *The Lord Of The Rings* set in modern-day America, with Las Vegas playing the role of Mordor (one does simply not walk into playing slot machines). The resulting 823-page doorstep — in 1990 a special edition inflated it to 1,152 pages — about the after effects of a weaponised influenza (99.4 per cent deadly) that practically wipes out the entire world is amongst King's most complex, politically alive, if not popular, works. Too dense to be adapted for cinema — it has previously been serialised for comics and a flawed 1994 TV miniseries — it seems a prime candidate for reupping in the age of Prestige TV. So, adapted by Josh Boone (*The New Mutants*) and Benjamin Cavell (*Homeland*), *The Stand* is ridiculously timely, but still struggles to overcome the problems set by visualising a breezeblock of a novel.

Although it was ordered to series in 2019, *The Stand* couldn't be more 2020. From its story of a killer superflu (and the attendant conspiracy theories) to the scene work (watch the suspicions created by a simple cough), from the themes

(how much should leaders tell the truth to the public about a deadly virus) to the imagery (streets of New York, truckloads of bodies turned into landfill), the story perfectly taps into the zeitgeist. The first four episodes mostly outline the characters chosen by 108-year-old Mother Abigail (Whoopi Goldberg, crossing Mother Theresa with Yoda) to become the leaders of a new social system post-pandemic. So, we get potted backstories for Stu Redman (James Marsden), the first person discovered to be immune to the plague; Fran Goldsmith (Odessa Young), a pregnant college student; Larry Underwood (Jovan Adepo), a New York singer; Glen Bateman (Greg Kinnear), a sociology professor who has painted pictures of the group before even meeting them; and Nick Andros (Henry Zaga), a deaf-mute drifter.

As you'd expect from an 800-page plus novel, *The Stand* is teeming with characters — cop killer Lloyd Henreid (Nat Wolff) and teacher Nadine Cross (Amber Heard) are playing for the dark side, led by Nathan Flagg aka The Dark Man (Alexander Skarsgård) — and many of the characters lack subtleties (Owen Teague's Harold Lauder is creepy teen 101). It means these early stretches have the feeling of treading water before the story proper can begin. Yet within these bog-standard character introductions there are absorbing sequences — such as Larry's chase through New York with a wealthy Manhattanite (Heather Graham), a tense set-piece that sees Fran held hostage — and, as the show begins to deal with building a society and confronting Flagg, momentum starts to grow. It's a decent adaptation in terms of scale and scares, but really bites off more than it can chew in delivering the ambition contained within King's (823) pages. **IAN FREER**

VERDICT Stephen King's magnum opus is possibly too big in narrative scope and thematic aspirations to find a proper home in visual storytelling. But it is a perfect fit for the times, and this current adaptation gets off to a solid, if not spectacular, start.



Paranoid androids: Mother (Amanda Collin) and Father (Abubakar Salim) survey their new surroundings.

[TV]

RAISED BY WOLVES: SEASON 1

★★★★

OUT NOW / SKY ATLANTIC
EPISODES VIEWED 10 OF 10

SHOWRUNNER Aaron Guzikowski

CAST Amanda Collin, Abubakar Salim, Niamh Algar, Travis Fimmel

PLOT A pair of androids named Mother (Amanda Collin) and Father (Abubakar Salim) flee a dying Earth to raise a litter of human embryos on a harsh and distant planet. Further complications arise with the arrival of another band of Earth-born refugees: the fanatical, sun-worshipping Mithraic.

GIVING RIDLEY SCOTT a sack of cash and allowing him to noodle the philosophy of the human condition via the medium of science-fiction is surely among the safest bets a studio can make. However, while *Raised By Wolves'* android-centric story might evoke notions of *Blade Runner*, it's *Prometheus'* presence that is most keenly felt as we explore the barren, hostile landscape of Kepler-22b. As executive producer

and director of the series' opening episodes, Scott leans into the hard sci-fi he dabbled with in his divisive *Alien* prequels, putting his stamp on a story by Aaron Guzikowski (*Prisoners*, *The Red Road*) that's equal parts castaway yarn and unorthodox parenting drama.

A far cry from either the neon-drenched streets of Deckard's LA or the sulphurous pools of LV-223, Kepler is a desaturated wasteland. The androids arrive in a no-frills, pill-shaped vessel, wearing grey, rubber onesies and phallic caps that do little justice to the show's not insignificant budget. Scott sets an aesthetic that remains bare-bones and austere throughout, capturing the planet's harsh environment (shot on location in Cape Town) as the androids attempt to eke out an existence while nurturing their clutch of infants. The limited palette expands only slightly with the arrival of the Mithraic ark, and then primarily via arterial red.

When our Silicon Family Robinson encounter the zealous believers, the show's mythology begins to properly unspool, and we're taken on a journey that explores what it means to be a caregiver, the role of belief and the finer points of human nature. None of these ideas feel particularly fresh, nor like ground Scott hasn't covered in more depth elsewhere. The story also moves at such a ponderous pace that it at times feels more like guided meditation than actual entertainment. It doesn't help that, bar Father (Abubakar Salim) being programmed with

a penchant for terrible dad jokes, the show is entirely humourless, plodding along with a dour nihilism that often makes the atmosphere as spartan and unwelcoming as the environment.

The saving grace, though, is Mother. Amanda Collin is captivating as the cold yet nurturing matriarch, who switches from loving to terrifying in the blink of her weaponised eyes. The true nature of Mother (a retrofitted 'necromancer' android designed as a weapon of war) swiftly becomes the story's most compelling element, with all else rattling along some distance behind.

Collin alone is enough to keep most viewers coming back for more, but anyone hoping the pilot's deliberate pacing will eventually pick up is in for a disappointment. What the show lacks in velocity, however, it does make up for in demented plot-turns. As the story progresses, we're exposed to a space rapist in an iron mask, screams that liquify people and radioactive cucumbers. All building to an Episode 10 finale that is so mind-bendingly batshit, it almost ensures viewers will return for Season 2 just to find out what the hell is going on. **JAMES DYER**

VERDICT Appealing to the head over the heart, this is a detached existential musing on parenthood, the nature of consciousness and the role of theism. Otherwise known as what might have happened if *Prometheus* had been ten hours long.

Zendaya stars as drug addict Rue.



[TV]

EUPHORIA: TROUBLE DON'T ALWAYS LAST

★★★★

OUT NOW (SKY ATLANTIC/
NOW TV)
EPISODES VIEWED 1 OF 2

DIRECTOR Sam Levinson
CAST Zendaya, Colman Domingo

PLOT On Christmas Eve in a quiet American diner, high-schooler Rue (Zendaya) meets her sponsor Ali (Domingo). Over the course of their meal, the pair dissect Rue's drug addiction, which she has been battling throughout adolescence.

A FEW ECHOED bars of Labrinth and Zendaya's 'All For Us' open the first of two standalone chapters of *Euphoria*. It's the song that accompanied the first season's sorrowful final sequence, and neatly signals that we're picking up here, with a debilitated Rue in the throes of a heartbreak-induced relapse.

Euphoria was one of the most impactful and discussed shows of 2019. Created by a then fairly unknown Sam Levinson, the filmmaker applied a hyper-stylised aesthetic to the burgeoning issues that Gen Z teens face today. At its heart was Rue, whose addiction was the by-product of longstanding mental-health issues and losing her father at 13. Though the ensemble cast sparked with promise, Zendaya's devotion to Rue's self-destruction was the show's takeaway, while her narration provided a truthful, bracing insight into addiction and the Gen Z psyche.

Levinson utilises this performance for his first of two seasonal specials. 'Trouble Don't Always Last' centralises Rue's addiction and sheds the show's multi-narrative structure in favour of a two-hander between Zendaya — whose performance

as Rue made her the youngest Emmy-winner on record — and Colman Domingo as Ali. The latter was a small but enduring presence in the first season, but now Domingo shares the spotlight, rolling out mesmeric, if sometimes far-reaching, monologues on racism, religion and his own addiction, while wearing the weight of Rue's words on his face when she's speaking.

Where the show had outlined the genesis of Rue's addiction, 'Trouble Don't Always Last' intricately interrogates her motivations as a user. Her relapse was kickstarted when her first love Jules went to New York, while Rue made the choice to stay behind. Yet in the fantasy— in which she dotes on Jules in a sun-bleached city apartment — that preludes Rue's reality, she's also secretly using. Jules isn't her saviour, nor does Rue want to be saved, for reasons that are coaxed out across a sprawling hour.

It's a refreshing change of pace from Levinson, albeit one forced by Covid-19 filming restrictions. By dismantling his fiercely kinetic show, he makes room for a deep, empathetic dive into addiction that feels bold and new. Yet he doesn't abandon the show's visual foundations altogether; that same consummate approach to production still lingers, only presented here in a more subdued form. Cinematographer Marcell Rév returns to imbue this episode's more static composition with a familiar neon tinge, and Labrinth lends a mix of melancholy synth and twinkling melodies to his score.

In this distilled space, Zendaya only further proves that she's one of the most auspicious stars working today. With just a patch of face visible under her maroon hoodie, she deftly navigates through the shame and solitude of someone who — as Ali summarises — has been fighting a losing battle her entire life. **BETH WEBB**

VERDICT Though Levinson's stripped-back format may only hold fans' attention for this standalone episode, it inevitably brings the show's strengths to the surface. A handsomely crafted showcase for two erudite performers.

ON SCREEN CHECKLIST

Your at-a-glance view of this month's reviews



FILM OUT NOW

ALEX WHEATLE	★★★★★	P37
DREAMLAND	★★★★	P37
EDUCATION	★★★★★	P37
HAPPIEST SEASON	★★★★★	P32
THE MIDNIGHT SKY	★★★★	P42
MURDER ME, MONSTER	★★★★	P39
THE PROM	★★★★	P39
ROSE ISLAND	★★★★	P39
SUPERINTELLIGENCE	★★	P37
SYLVIE'S LOVE	★★★★★	P35
WONDER WOMAN 1984 (ABOVE)	★★★★★	P30

25 DECEMBER SOUL

★★★★ P38

26 DECEMBER FREAKY ONE NIGHT IN MIAMI

★★★★★ P34
★★★★★ P40

30 DECEMBER PIECES OF A WOMAN

★★★★★ P33

1 JANUARY SING ME A SONG

★★★★★ P37

15 JANUARY

ARCHIVE	★★★★	P32
BLITHE SPIRIT	★★	P36
STARDUST	★★	P37

TV OUT NOW

EUPHORIA: TROUBLE DON'T ALWAYS LAST	★★★★★	P45
RAISED BY WOLVES: SEASON 1	★★★★	P44

27 DECEMBER BLACK NARCISSUS

★★★★ P43

1 JANUARY THE SERPENT

★★★★ P43

3 JANUARY THE STAND

★★★★ P43

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THIS IS THE WAY

AS SLEEK AS BESKAR,
AS DYNAMIC AS A LIGHT
CRUISER, AS SOULFUL
AS GROGU'S EYES,
THE MANDALORIAN IS THE
POP-CULTURE PHENOMENON
OF OUR TIMES. JOIN US ON
A DEEP DIVE INTO THE
BOUNTY-HUNTER SHOW
THAT KEEPS PAYING OFF



THE NEW HOPE

The *Star Wars* fandom was in tumult, split into warring tribes. Then along came THE MANDALORIAN. Here's how it managed to bind the galaxy together once more

WORDS BEN TRAVIS



IT WAS A period of civil war. The fandom had divided into factions increasingly entrenched in opposing viewpoints, with little hope of surrender from any one side.

For a saga that was always supposed to be about balance, *Star Wars* somehow lost it along the way. After *The Force Awakens* reignited the spark of the galaxy far, far away, the unified excitement it conjured couldn't last. *The Last Jedi* split opinion like a Resistance cruiser blasting through a Dreadnought at lightspeed. *Solo: A Star Wars Story* demystified a character whose mystery was really the whole point, and sputtered at the box office. And *The Rise Of Skywalker* proved even more divisive in its attempt to bring all nine Episodes of the Skywalker Saga full circle. The one thing *Star Wars* fans could agree on was that they couldn't agree about *Star Wars*.

Until a certain mysterious gunslinger walked into town.



THAT'S DIN DJARIN'S thing, it seems: striding boldly into places besieged by conflict and putting it right, going about his business with nary a dent in his beskar steel. And just when *Star Wars* fans were at their most divided, *The Mandalorian* united them once again. For a franchise so inherently cinematic — whose every instalment is the definition of event cinema — it took a move to the small screen, and a spin-off story based on Boba Fett's fan-favourite armour design, to finally bring the people together.

Two seasons in, it's abundantly clear why *The Mandalorian* gets *Star Wars* so right. It's because the show, and its creator Jon Favreau and executive producer Dave Filoni, understand that there is no such thing as 'right' *Star Wars* or 'wrong' *Star Wars* — there is only *Star Wars*. (With perhaps one exception: the Disney theme parks' Hyperspace Hoopla dance-offs, whose highlights include bling-clad Jawas strutting to Aerosmith's 'Walk This Way', and Darth Vader shaking his evil hips to Michael Jackson's 'Beat It'. In no world can this be considered 'right' *Star Wars*.)

It's a powerful notion, though: that every facet of the franchise, its multitudes of characters and stories and eras, is equally valid. There's always been conflict in what *Star Wars* could or should be. The prequels were castigated for being stylistically and tonally different from the original trilogy. Some fans fundamentally disagreed with *The Last Jedi's* vision of Luke Skywalker. Decades ago, many felt that the Ewoks had no right to take down the Empire in *Return Of The Jedi*.

But *The Mandalorian's* creed is that *all Star Wars* is worth celebrating. It's a show that wholeheartedly embraces every era, every corner of the universe — the original trilogy, the prequel trilogy, the sequel trilogy, the *Clone Wars* and *Rebels* animated series, the canonical expanded-universe novels, even obscure retro toys and old video games. It's not that >

The Mandalorian is somehow more authentically *Star Wars* than the recent films — it's that it recognises that *all of Star Wars* is authentic *Star Wars*. This is the way.



WHILE *THE MANDALORIAN* manages to appeal to every sub-section of the *Star Wars* fandom, it's no wonder that those who grew up in the playgrounds of George Lucas' imagination have fallen particularly head-over-heels for the show. While the prequels were jarringly digital after the rusty-old-junk practical aesthetic of the original trilogy, and the sequels popped with a contemporary-blockbuster visual sheen, the look of *The Mandalorian* is vintage *Star Wars* — all scuzzy Outer Rim towns and backwater bars and grimy retro-futurist tech. Every episode is packed with eye-catching aliens that could have come straight from the original Mos Eisley cantina sequence. (A giant ant by the name of 'Dr Mandible'? Sure!) And, of course, it helps that the show is set in the aftermath of *Return Of The Jedi*, as the last vestiges of the fallen Empire cling to power — a time period that affords Favreau and Filoni the chance to romp around in Imperial facilities and revel in classic *Star Wars* iconography.

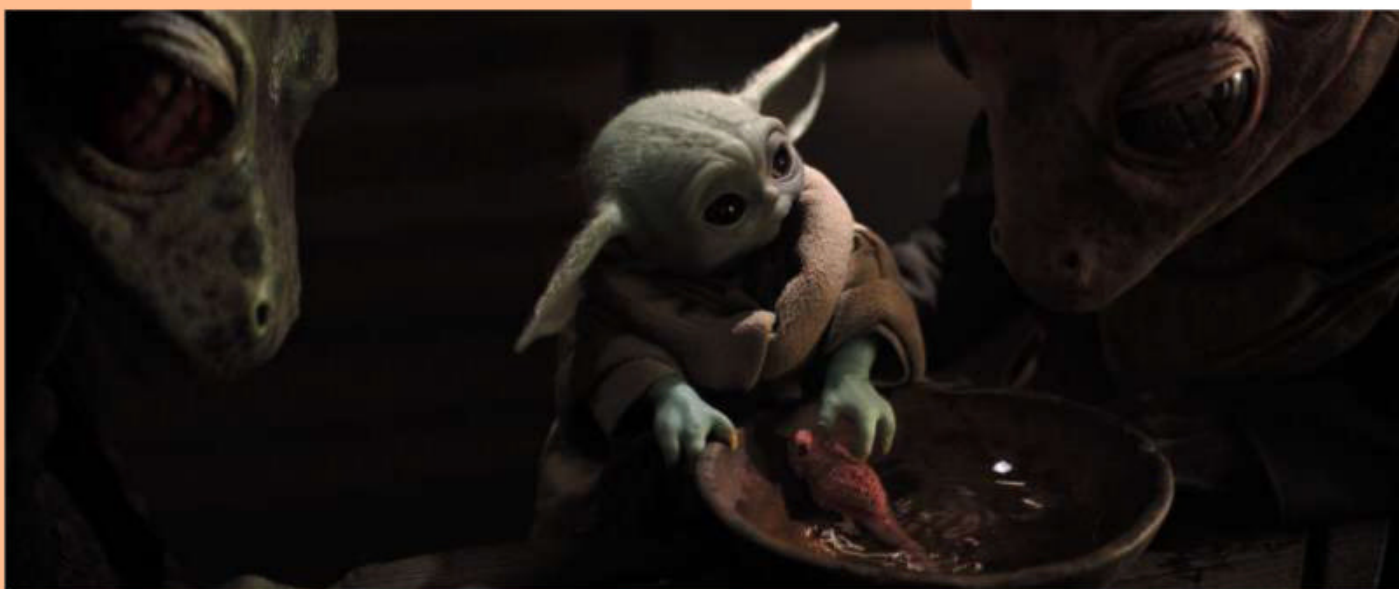
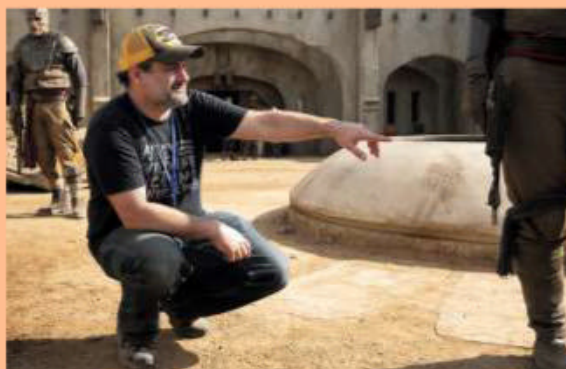
But the show's reverence for George Lucas is much more than skin-deep. *The Mandalorian* riffs on the very things that inspired *Star Wars* in the first place (with actual riffs, courtesy of Ludwig Göransson's invigorating score). It's no secret that Lucas was heavily influenced by Western tropes, and more than any other outing in the franchise, *The Mandalorian* delivers Sergio Leone in space (Season 2 premiere 'The Marshal' could have been called 'A Fistful Of Credits'). And it doesn't just capture the cowboy vibe. *The Mandalorian* also cribs from Lucas' other biggest inspiration: Japanese popular culture. Kurosawa's *The Hidden Fortress* was the blueprint for the original 1977 film, and the Jedi and lightsabers were always a stand-in for samurai and katanas. Here, the clear influence is Kazuo Koike and Goseki Kojima's manga *Lone Wolf And Cub* — the tale of a wandering assassin travelling through feudal Japan with his three-year-old child. Right from Chapter 1, Mando is the archetypal Lone Wolf — but his story only really begins when he finally finds his Cub.

It's impossible to celebrate the joys of *The Mandalorian* without waxing lyrical about its most joyous component: The Child. Again riffing on a beloved element from the original trilogy, wizened Jedi Master Yoda, he turned out to be the surprise star, not appearing in any promo materials. Chapter 1 was itself a pre-reel for the show's true premise: the galaxy's biggest badass, looking after with the galaxy's cutest critter.

Like Kim Kardashian before him, Baby Yoda broke the internet. It's not hard to see why — anyone with eyes and a heart couldn't fail to fall for Groggu (who are we kidding? He'll *always* be Baby Yoda). Maybe it's those big black eyes, or



Clockwise from top left: Dave Filoni on set; Jon Favreau gets down with some heavy artillery, as Giancarlo Esposito (who plays Moff Gideon) looks on; Ahsoka Tano (Rosario Dawson); Groggu, aka Baby Yoda; Din Djarin/Mando (Pedro Pascal) talks to Bo-Katan Kryze (Katee Sackhoff); Temuera Morrison as Boba Fett.



that fuzzy green coconut head, or the way the sun shines through his soft pink ears. Perhaps it's the cooing noises he makes, or how he's always getting into mischief, filling his gob with whatever he can get his tiny magic hands on (frogs! Spiders! Forbidden eggs!) Really, it's all of the above. Either way, The Child is pure *Star Wars* gold.

It might seem obvious now that the kid would be such a monumental hit, but his success was never guaranteed. *Star Wars* fans have had a complicated relationship with cuteness, dating right back to 1983. After the unabashed darkness of *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Return Of The Jedi's* Ewoks were a turn-off for fans who weren't prepared for cuddly, forest-dwelling teddy bears

to play a major role in defeating the Galactic Empire. Today, the Ewoks are a long-accepted part of the golden original trilogy — but their sense of daring delightfulness lived on in Jar Jar Binks and the Porgs, who each faced a backlash for having the audacity to invoke childlike joy.

Props, then, to Favreau and Filoni for giving us hands-down *Star Wars*' most heart-poppingly adorable creature, and making him the focus of the entire story. Mando might get top billing, but it's Groggu — the mystery of his existence, the possibilities of his future — driving the narrative. Yes, he's a marketing team's dream. He's endlessly GIF-able and meme-worthy. But to put that cuteness at the heart of a *Star Wars* narrative is genuinely ballsy.



This is what *The Mandalorian* does, though — it embraces even the most unpopular areas of *Star Wars* with open arms. Just see the Imperial base reveal in ‘Chapter 12: The Siege’, which dared to invoke the prequels’ derided notion of midi-chlorians and the Sith-cloning that led to the creation of Snoke and the resurgence of Emperor Palpatine in *The Rise Of Skywalker* within a single scene.

The dynamic between Mando and Baby Yoda continues to be the series’ most compelling thread — how the kid is learning from his new father figure, how Din is visibly softening. It’s yet another way that *The Mandalorian* really understands the essence of *Star Wars*. The Skywalker Saga was always a grand, operatic,

family story. On the small screen, it’s simply found a different kind of family to focus on.

WHEN *THE RISE Of Skywalker* signalled the end of *Star Wars*’ central saga, the question of its future loomed ominously. And while more spin-off movies are in the works, *The Mandalorian* shows why that question was so hard to answer: because the ideal vehicle hadn’t been invented yet.

It feels inaccurate to label it as a TV show. Sure, it’s an episodic story — but it doesn’t behave like television, at least not in the golden-age-of-TV-drama sense that we’re used to. There are recurring characters, but it’s not an

ensemble piece. The episodes have no B-plots, and Mando is in near-every scene. The sense of blockbuster scale is way beyond even the most expensive Netflix drama. *The Mandalorian* isn’t a movie, but it’s not typical TV either. Structurally, stylistically, it’s something new.

It’s not just the medium that the show is evolving — it’s *Star Wars* itself. For the first time in live action, the Force and the Jedi are no longer the centre of the galaxy. The Way Of The Mandalore is a whole new culture and creed to explore, with its own rules, traditions, and splintered factions. The introduction of a live-action Ahsoka Tano — thrillingly crossing over from the animated series, where she was Anakin’s apprentice — provides a tangential connection to the Skywalkers, but for the most part these are thrillingly new adventures.

Behind the camera, *The Mandalorian* is what the future of *Star Wars* should look like. Across all three movie trilogies (and the *Star Wars Story* spin-offs), only white men have directed cinematic *Star Wars*. Already, *The Mandalorian* is redressing that balance. So far, the likes of Rick Famuyiwa, Bryce Dallas Howard and Carl Weathers have brought action spectacle in abundance. Deborah Chow’s brilliant work has seen her snapped up to helm the upcoming Obi-Wan series. And the Season 1 finale was shot through with Taika Waititi’s own distinct flavour. It’s only right that a show presenting a galaxy of infinite possibility should come from creators of infinite diversity — finally, *The Mandalorian* is making that happen.

It’s not just who’s making it — it’s how it’s made, too. *Star Wars* has always been a technological gamechanger. Industrial Light & Magic set a new standard for special effects with the original trilogy, while the prequels pioneered groundbreaking digital production processes and CGI visuals. Already, *The Mandalorian* has left its mark on Hollywood by shooting on ‘the volume’ — a hi-res video-wall that renders realistic in-camera backdrops in real-time, creating whole worlds in a single room. George Lucas’ innovative spirit is right there in *The Mandalorian*’s DNA — always pushing forwards creatively.



THE JOY OF *Star Wars* has always been that there’s something in it for everyone. It’s an old-school, serial-inspired adventure story. It’s about nobodies being somebodies in a galaxy far bigger than they can comprehend. It’s bold and dark, and also sweet and silly. It’s for kids and big kids alike. It’s old and new and ever-evolving.

The Mandalorian is all those things, too. Whether you grew up on the originals, adore the sequels, have been a long-standing prequels apologist, or devoted years to watching the animated series, *The Mandalorian* contains whatever it is you love about the galaxy far, far away. It’s ironic that Mando himself isn’t a Force-user — because of all things, it’s *The Mandalorian* that found a way to bring balance back to *Star Wars*. 🗡️

GA-GA FOR GROGU



The whole world has gone crazy for Mando's sidekick. But could it be that his adorable emerald exterior conceals something darker?

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT



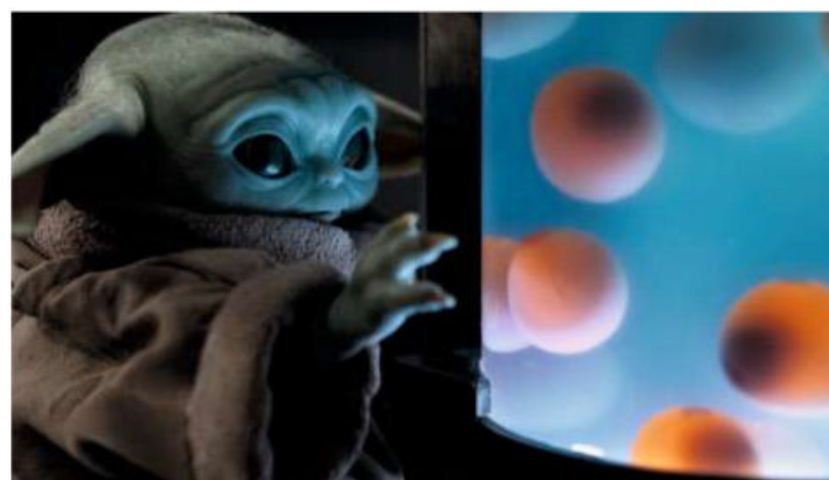
WHETHER YOU CALL him Grogu, The Child, or his unofficial if slightly contentious nickname Baby Yoda, there's one thing we can all agree on when it comes to the tiny green star of *The Mandalorian*: he's cute as hell. Just about cute enough to make your heart burst, in fact. Look at him, chirping in pleasure as Mando whizzes through the air! Chuckle in glee as he uses the Force to steal a kid's biscuits! Feel that warm and fuzzy glow as he nonchalantly chomps on the eggs of another specie— wait, what?

If you were one of those cooing as The Artist Formerly Known As Baby Yoda worked his way through Frog Lady's last remaining eggs in Chapter 10 — if you rolled your eyes and tutted and said, "Boys will be boys" — then congratulations. You fell into Jon Favreau's trap.

Ever since Grogu first appeared, right at the end of Chapter 1 of the show, disarming Mando with his big puppy-dog eyes and general chilled vibe, his chief weapon has been his cuteness. It's almost as if he's been genetically engineered in a lab (or a Disney concept-art workshop), designed to win over allies with those big baby blacks of his. It's a trick that has even worked on his enemies — did Dr Pershing let him go in Season 1 because he didn't want to kill the little fella and exhaust a potential supply of midi-chlorians, or because he couldn't bring himself to harm something that utterly beguiling?

It's an evolutionary trait that has worked wonders for, say, the PR of pandas. But Grogu's cuteness masks a potential, more problematic, darkness within. One of the thematic preoccupations of *The Mandalorian* has been nature versus nurture. It applies to the title character — can he overcome the dogmatic principles instilled in him through growing up





Clockwise from left: Grogu: having a ball; “Faster! Faster!” — with Mandalorian guardian Din Djarin (Pedro Pascal); “Cute, moi?”; Baby Yoda takes the biscuit; Feeling the Force; Glamping with Ahsoka Tano (Rosario Dawson); Moff Gideon (Giancarlo Esposito) gets heavy; “There yet nearly, are we?”



with, essentially, a Mandalorian death cult, and assert his own personality? — but it also applies to Baby Grogu. Sorry, The Child Yoda. We assume that, because he wields the Force, is allied to (ostensibly) a good guy in Mando, and looks like Yoda, the kindest and wisest of all Jedi Masters, that he’s going to turn out on the side of the angels.

Ain’t necessarily so. Grogu, as innocent as he seems, has been through a lot in his 50 years. Ahsoka Tano essentially confirms, in “The Jedi”, that he managed to survive Order 66, and the purge of The Jedi and his fellow younglings, by the skin of his milk teeth. He’s then spent much of the time being buffeted around the galaxy, winding up time and again in the clutches of terrible, horrible, no good, very bad people who have instilled in him a fair amount of fear, anger, and hate. All traits that could lead to the dark side. And traits that reveal themselves every now and again: a flash of petulance here, genuine anger whenever Mando is threatened by others. His dogged determination to eat Frog Lady’s eggs even when it was made very clear that he knew what he was doing was wrong was, on the surface, played for laughs. But here, Favreau is perhaps testing the waters, preparing us for the

revelation that this almost unbearably adorable bairn might have darker edges.

For dire warnings about the churning maelstrom inside him, we need look no further than his genetic cousin, Actual Full-Sized Yoda. The wizened Jedi Master didn’t plaster his hut on Dagobah with self-help posters, but if he had, “Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering” and “Once you start down that dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny” might have been prominent. Could the rest of *The Mandalorian* — however long it runs — be about a battle for Grogu’s soul, as he himself struggles to resist the lure of the dark side?

Of course, whether Disney would ever commit to killing the green goose that lays the golden egg is debatable. But that Favreau, Filoni and co have managed to introduce this much nuance into a character who has still to utter a word is quite remarkable. And for what it’s worth, we suspect that Grogu’s sweet, caring nature — which wins out 99.9 per cent of the time — will ultimately prove victorious. But if his first words, when they come, are, “Die, Jedi scum,” we can’t say we weren’t warned. And by that point, it really won’t matter what you call him. **E**

101 MANDO EASTER EGGS



From wandering ice-cream makers to Jar-Jar jokes, we delve deep into the sneaky secrets of the show

WORDS JAMES DYER, NICK DE SEMLYEN



CHAPTER 1 – 'THE MANDALORIAN'

1 HUTTESE

The bar patron addresses our hero in the language of Jabba and his portly ilk.

2 SQUID FACE

We first caught a glimpse of the tentacled Quarren in *Return Of The Jedi* in the form of Jabba's accountant Tessek, also known as 'Squid Face'.

3 THE KUBAZ

The aardvark-schnozzed cab dispatcher is part of a race most famous for bringing us the shady Garindan, who dobbed in Luke and Ben to the Empire at Mos Eisley spaceport.

4 LIFE DAY

The Mythrol complains he's going to miss this event, celebrated by Chewbacca and family in the dire 1978 *Star Wars Holiday Special*.

5 THE GUN

Mando's natty rifle (an Amban phase-pulse blaster) is another nod to the *Holiday Special*, where Boba Fett (in his very first appearance) is seen using it during the animated segment.

6 CARBONITE

The Mythrol finds bounties in the Razor Crest's hold, frozen in carbonite. It's a nice throwback to *The Empire Strikes Back*, despite this not being standard practice for bounty hunters (it's Vader who freezes Han).

7 ENTRY DROID

The *Star Wars* universe's equivalent of a ring doorbell, The Client's globe-faced entry droid is the same model as that used at Jabba's palace.

8 GONK

The GNK or 'Gonk' droid first seen in the Jawa sandcrawler in *A New Hope* not only turns up at The Client's office, but Peli Motto has one waddling around her garage in Season 2.



Pedro Pascal as Din Djarin, aka the Mandalorian, brandishing his nifty Amban phase-pulse blaster.

9 ROAST MONKEY-LIZARD

Kowakian Monkey-Lizards are awful — who can forget Salacious Crumb cackling at our heroes' plight in *Return Of The Jedi*? Still, it's a bit sad to see one being cooked on a spit.

10 UGNAUGHT

Kuul is an Ugnaught — the porcine labourers first seen in Cloud City.

11 BLURRGs

Kuul's creatures will be familiar to some, having cropped up in *The Clone Wars* and as beasts of burden in 1985's *Ewoks: The Battle For Endor*.

12 IG-11

The homicidal bounty hunter is just one IG series assassin droid to have popped up in *Star Wars* lore. The most famous example is IG-88, who Vader commissioned to find the Millennium Falcon.

CHAPTER 2 - 'THE CHILD'

13 THE TRANDOSHAN

The band of reptilian bounty hunters which attempt to bushwhack Mando are the same species as Bossk, one of Vader's cohorts.

14 SANDCRAWLER ASSAULT

Mando's attempt to climb the sandcrawler while being pelted by Jawas is highly reminiscent of Stage 2 of *Super Star Wars* on the SNES, in which you (as Luke) try the very same thing.

15 GOING UP

In his first feat of raw power, Grogu uses the Force to lift the mudhorn off the ground, saving Mando's beskar-clad behind. The sequence is very reminiscent of Yoda lifting the X-wing on Dagobah. Though unlike his tiny lookalike, Yoda didn't have a little nap straight after.

CHAPTER 3 - 'THE SIN'

16 TWO SCOOPS

When Lando evacuated Cloud City, one resident can be seen clutching an ice-cream-maker. When The Client bestows upon Mando his payment of a 'camtono' of beskar, the vessel turns out to be the same prop.

17 TRASH

When Mando discovers Grogu's discarded bassinet in the alley, cast a glance at the junk leaning against the wall and you'll notice the metal beam Han attempts to brace the trash compactor with in *A New Hope*.

18 INTERROGATE THIS

That spherical droid in Dr Pershing's lab is an IT-O interrogation droid, famously seen about to shoot up Leia with truth drugs aboard the Death Star.

19 CLONE CONNECTION

Dr Pershing's armband bears the emblem of the Kaminoan cloners, and is worn by members of the lookalike army in *Attack Of The Clones*.

20 DROID ARMY

During the flashback, we discover that Mando's hatred of droids springs from the death of his parents, slaughtered by Trade Federation-issue Heavy Battle Droids.

21 HOPE LIVES

Entreating Mando to trust him, Karga paraphrases Princess Leia's iconic message: "Because I'm your only hope."

22 PAZ VIZSLA

That big Mandalorian who helps Mando? He's Paz Vizsla, from the same clan as *The Clone Wars*' Pre Vizsla (nice VFX joke) — both voiced by Jon Favreau.

CHAPTER 4 - 'SANCTUARY'

23 THE LOTH-CAT

This adorable fluff-ball first popped up in animated form in *Rebels* — its aesthetic remains largely unchanged.



24 AT-ST

What do you use when you want to terrorise shrimp farmers? An Imperial All-Terrain Scout Transport, as used to great effect on (and by) the Ewoks in *Return Of The Jedi*.

25 WOMP RATS

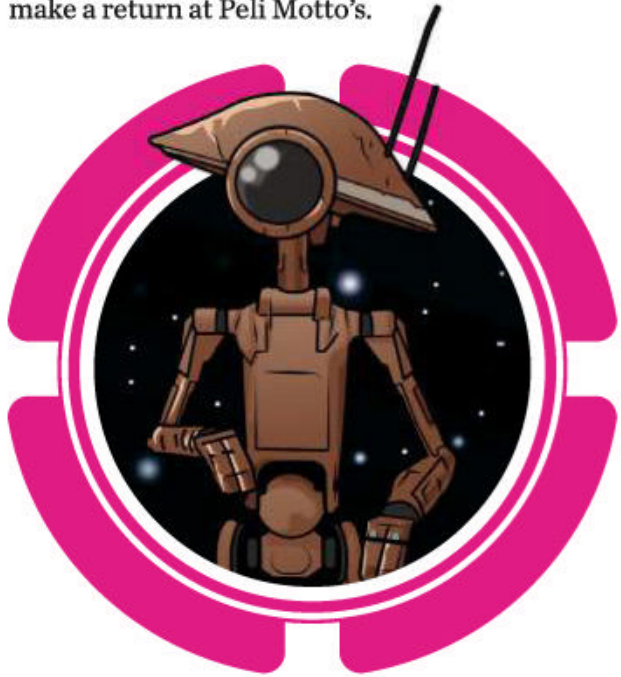
Poor space-rodents. Not only is their fur used by Tusken Raiders for clothing (womp-rat camisoles: very chic), but they've now been mentioned twice in *Star Wars* but not seen.

CHAPTER 5 - 'THE GUNSLINGER'

26 MOS EISLEY *Star Wars'* favourite wretched hive of scum and villainy makes an appearance.

27 PELI MOTTO Mechanic/ babysitter Peli Motto is played by comedian Amy Sedaris, who voices Princess Carolyn in *BoJack Horseman*.

28 PIT DROIDS The Larry, Curly and Moe of the *Star Wars* universe, *The Phantom Menace's* Pit Droids make a return at Peli Motto's.



29 THE CANTINA We're not saying Chalmun's Cantina is the only watering hole in Mos Eisley, but it's certainly the most popular. Calican meets Mando in this very establishment, sitting in Greedo's booth to boot.

30 NEW MANAGEMENT While once a watering hole where droids weren't welcome at all, the cantina is now run by one, specifically EV-9D9, whose CV includes a stint as Jabba The Hutt's resident torturer.

31 MACROBINOCULARS Calican's binocs are the same model as the pair used by Luke Skywalker in *A New Hope* to spy on Tusken Raiders.

32 DEWBACKS The green dinosaur that the dead bounty hunter's attached to is a dewback, first seen in Lucas' 1997 Special Edition *Star Wars*.

33 MOS ESPA Fennec Shand tips her assassin's hat to Mos Espa, the Tatooine town where Anakin grew up in *The Phantom Menace*.

34 THE HIGHER GROUND Mando observes that Shand's got the high ground, a nod to one of *Revenge Of The Sith's* most derided dialogue moments.



35 "SHE'S NO GOOD TO US DEAD" Mando's line echoes the words of Boba Fett to Darth Vader in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

36 BEGGAR'S CANYON Calican's body is dragged off to Beggar's Canyon, a place, you may recall Luke mentioning, that's not too dissimilar to a Death Star trench.

CHAPTER 6 - 'THE PRISONER'

37 MAYFIELD Snarky thief Mayfield is played by stand-up comic Bill Burr; he was also one of Saul Goodman's henchmen in *Breaking Bad*.

38 CANTO BIGHT Mayfield describes the Razor Crest as "a Canto Bight slot machine", referring to the hectic casino planet seen in *The Last Jedi*.

39 BURG The hellish aspect of horned hood Burg is that of a Devaronian, a species glimpsed in the Mos Eisley cantina back in '77.

40 CLANCY BROWN Here playing Burg, he not only voiced

Darth Maul's brother in *The Clone Wars* but also Rebellion leader Ryder Azadi in *Rebels* and a Mandalorian called Montross in the game *Star Wars: Bounty Hunter*.

41 ZERO Robo-larcenist Zero is voiced by *IT Crowd* veteran Richard Ayoade, who reprises his role (despite being disassembled) in Chapter 10.

42 THE TWI'LEK Like Jabba's consigliere Bib Fortuna, Xi'an is a Twi'lek, here played by Natalia 'Nymphadora Tonks' Tena.





Clockwise from top left: Mando with Cantina regular Dr Mandible; Biker scouts, part of the Imperial ranks; Death troopers assemble!

43 GUNGAN GAG Mayfield joshes that Mando might actually be a Gungan under his helmet. “Is that why youssa don’t want to show your face?”

44 MOUSE DROID What ship would be complete without an MSE-6 repair droid, better known as the Death Star’s Mouse Droid?

45 THE PHANTOM VOICE The Republic officer who is murdered by the team is actually one Anakin Skywalker. Or to be precise, the character is played by Matt Lanter, who voices Skywalker in *The Clone Wars*.

46 ARDENNIAN The four-armed simian seen lurking in one of the cells is an Ardenian — the same species as Rio Durant in *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (who, lest we forget, was voiced by Jon Favreau).

47 PILOT CAMEOS The three X-wing pilots, Trapper Wolf, Jib Dodger and Sash Ketter, are played by series directors Dave Filoni, Rick Famuyiwa and Deborah Chow.

CHAPTER 7 – ‘THE RECKONING’

48 THE ZABRAK MMA fighter Gina Carano engages in a different kind of cage fight in this episode, taking on a Zabrak — the same species as Darth Maul.

49 GREEF’S THUGS One of them is a Kajain’sa’Nikto, abbreviated to Nikto and part of the Klatu, Barada, Nikto trio in *Return Of The Jedi* — a Lucas nod to *The Day The Earth Stood Still*.

50 FORCE-HEALING When Rey heals the sand worm in *Rise Of Skywalker*, no-one batted an eyelid. Why? Because Baby Yoda had just made Force-healing live-action canon when he patched up Greef Karga.

51 BAR DROID Former Imperials find work where they can get it, as evidenced by the RA-7 Protocol droid (aka Death Star Droid) currently working the bar.

52 DEATH TROOPERS Black-clad death troopers feature among Moff Gideon’s forces, first seen backing up Director Krennic in *Rogue One*.

53 TROOP TRANSPORTER The craft that brings in the stormtroopers is a life-size replica of Kenner’s iconic Imperial Troop Transporter, among the first *Star Wars* toys.

54 HEAVY ARTILLERY Another toy throwback, the gun emplacement Mando commandeers was used by the Hoth Troopers in *The Empire Strikes Back* and replicated in 3.5” form for ’80s kids.

CHAPTER 8 – ‘REDEMPTION’

55 BIKER SCOUTS Stormtroopers aren’t the only Imperials to have survived the fall of the Empire, with biker scouts joining the Imperial remnant’s ranks.

56 ALDERAAN Gideon calls out Carasynthia Dune as hailing from the planet Alderaan, which the Death Star blew up just to make a point in *A New Hope*.

57 FLAME TROOPERS The episode heats up with the arrival of the red-and-white-clad Flame Troopers, which gamers may be familiar with from *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*.

58 MIND FLAYER Cara Dune mentions the horror of being interrogated by a Mind Flayer. Not proof that she’s a D&D fan, but rather a reference to a Bor Gullet, seen near-lobotomising Bodhi in *Rogue One*.

59 BACTA BOOST Nurse IG-11 saves the day (and Mando’s skull) with a liberal application of healing agent bacta, which Luke is submerged in after the Wampa attack in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

60 MANDO’S PEDANT The trinket he gives baby Grogu features the skull of a mythosaur, which ancient Mandalorians used to tame and ride.



61 THE DARKSABER What’s cooler than a lightsaber? A darksaber, you idiot! Wielded by Pre Vizsla and Darth Maul in *The Clone Wars*, it now is gripped by Moff Gideon.

CHAPTER 9 – ‘THE MARSHAL’

62 GAMORREANS Mando meets Gor Koresh at a brutal axe-fight featuring two of the pig-looking creatures Jabba once used as bouncers.



63 CALL THE CONSTABLE

Look among the crowd at the fight and you can spot the helmet of Constable Zuvio, a character whose role in *The Force Awakens* can be mostly found on J.J. Abrams' cutting-room floor.

64 SPACE POKER

If you're going to play cards in *Star Wars*, Sabacc is your game. It's how Lando lost the Falcon to Han and apparently how Peli Motto earns a little on the side.

65 VANTH BEGINS

Timothy Oliphant's Cobb Vanth made his debut in Chuck Wendig's novel *Aftermath* when he indeed acquires Fett's armour, although in that case he gains it by more nefarious means.

66 LAST ORDERS

The bartender in Freetown is a Weequay, aliens who made an appearance among Jabba's heavies in *Return Of The Jedi*.

67 UNDER THE HOOD

If you ever wondered what happened to Anakin's Podracer after his big race, the answer is found here: one of the engines makes up the body of Cobb Vanth's speeder bike.

68 ICE CRYSTALS

During Cobb's flashback sequence, we not only see the footage of the second Death Star exploding, but the crystals he steals are housed in yet another ice-cream-maker 'camtono'.

69 WHO LET THE DOGS OUT?

The Tusken Raiders' burly dogs, or Massiffs, first slobbered their way onto the screen in *Attack Of The Clones*.

70 LOOT KRAYT

Krayt dragons are the apex predators of Tatooine. We saw one in skeletal form and heard Obi-Wan mimic its cry in *A New Hope*, but only now do we see one in full, roar-y glory.

71 ROCKET MAN

Vanth's jetpack-mounted rocket launcher was also seen on the original Kenner figure of Boba Fett, until the toy company recalled early figures for fear kids would shoot themselves in the eye.



CHAPTER 10 - 'THE PASSENGER'

72 ANT-MAN 3

Dr Mandible, not just a very large insectoid with an excellent name, but a sly nod to this episode's guest director, *Ant-Man*'s Peyton Reed.

73 MEAT CUTE

We see a droid roasting meat on a Podracer engine, something you can also see when visiting the Ronto Roaster restaurant at Galaxy's Edge theme parks.

74 THE X-FILES

The X-wings, despite being part of the New Republic, are the former Rebellion's T-65B model, not the Resistance's T-70, which wouldn't arrive until 20 years later.

75 ICE SPIDERS

The frozen arachnids (known as Krykna) are inspired by original Ralph McQuarrie concept art for *The Empire Strikes Back*.

CHAPTER 11 - 'THE HEIRESS'

76 BO SELECTED

Katee Sackhoff makes her *Star Wars* live-action debut here as Mandalorian warrior

Bo-Katan Kryze, a character who appeared prominently in *The Clone Wars*, also voiced by Sackhoff.



77 SASHA BANKS

Bo Katan's pal Koska Reeves is played by Mercedes Varnado, aka this WWE wrestler.

78 THE MIGHTY BOSCH

The imperial officer in charge of the transport is played by legendary character actor and Harry Bosch himself, Titus Welliver. His face is his warrant, even in space.



Clockwise from left:
The Death Watch
do their death
thing; Boba Fett
(Temuera Morrison),
unmasked; Ahsoka
(Rosario Dawson)
brandishes her
white lightsabers.



79 DEATH WATCH A cult of Mandalorian warriors who hang on to traditional values (eg killing people in cool ways). They're a big part of the *Clones Wars* series, appearing here in live action for the first time.

CHAPTER 12 - 'THE SIEGE'

80 AQUALISH Cara Dune cleans the clocks of a number of Aqualish thugs, the same walrus-faced species as Ponda Baba, who loses his arm to Ben in *A New Hope's* cantina.

81 PROTOCOL DROID That robot banging on about the Akkadese Maelstrom is the same model as C-3PO. It does a poor job of disciplining the younglings, entirely failing to stop Grogu barfing.

82 BLUE COOKIES The macarons Grogu half-inches are coloured in a reference to the blue milk from *A New Hope*. What do they taste like? According to Jon Favreau: "blue raspberry".

83 REACTOR CORE The core in the Imperial base is the same model used for the Death Star's tractor-beam control, disabled by Obi-Wan in *A New Hope*.

CHAPTER 13 - 'THE JEDI'

84 ALL WHITE Ahsoka's striking, pure white lightsabers were historically blood-red. She purified the Kyber crystals in the blades using the Force.

85 SIMPLY THE BESKAR Mando deflects Ahsoka's lightsabers with his armour. Beskar armour was originally forged for this very purpose during the Jedi-Mandalorian war.

86 SITH HAPPENS We discover that Grogu was a student at the Jedi temple before it fell, making him one of the only survivors of Order 66.

87 YADDLE REDACTED Ahsoka says she's only encountered one other creature like Grogu: Yoda. Handily forgetting another member of the Jedi Council, the unsettlingly coiffured Yaddle.

88 MUCH FEAR Ahsoka's comment about Grogu's terror is a similar observation to the one Yoda made about Luke in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

89 HELLO, MEATBAG The Magistrate is backed by two HK-87 assassin droids, clearly updated models of *Knights Of The Old Republic's* famously psychotic HK-47.

90 I'M YOUR HUCKLEBERRY Michael Biehn, quick-drawing a gun on a lonesome street? It's impossible to see this and not think of his iconic bad 'un, Johnny Ringo in *Tombstone*.

91 THRAWN AGAIN What information does Ahsoka want from the Magistrate? The location of Grand Admiral Thrawn, made famous by the novels of Timothy Zahn back in the 1990s and canonised by his appearance in *Rebels*.

CHAPTER 14 - 'THE TRAGEDY'

92 BOBA'S BACK The return of Boba Fett, played by Temuera Morrison, who has also played Jango Fett, all of the clones, and replaced Jeremy Bulloch as the voice of Boba in the Special Edition of *The Empire Strikes Back*.

93 LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON "I'm a simple man making his way through the galaxy, like my father before me." Fett is quoting his dad directly, lifting the line from *Attack Of The Clones*.

94 SHOULDER PAD The orange pauldron on one of the stormtroopers denotes the rank of commander. It's an accessory first spotted on the sandy shoulder of a trooper on Tatooine, way back in *Episode IV*.

95 KNEE ROCKETS Boba Fett dispatches troopers with his rocket-powered kneepads, which have been written about but never seen in action.

96 SPICE "This isn't a spice dream," Mando says as he eyes an Imperial cruiser, referring to the potent *Star Wars* drug Han Solo gets in trouble for ditching a shipment of in *A New Hope*.

97 THE PRISONER Little Grogu's pose in the detention centre is strikingly similar to the one Leia struck in *A New Hope*.

CHAPTER 15 - 'THE BELIEVER'

98 YOU'RE ON MUTE The microphone in the transport should look familiar, as it's the same model used by Han in the Death Star detention block. "We're all fine here, thanks. How are you?"

99 SPACE ADMIN After a lot of *Wages Of Fear*-esque truck action, we get a reference to a different kind of film, Mike Judge's *Office Space*, with Mayfeld's mention of "TPS reports".

100 OPERATION CINDER The name-check of this war-plan, in the form of a toast, will get any *Star Wars*-loving gamers excited — it features in *Battlefront II*.

101 SEISMIC STUFF The best sound effect in the *Star Wars* prequels returns as Boba Fett drops a power-chord-strumming seismic charge, just like the one his dad deployed against Obi-Wan in *Episode II*.



FOR A FEW CREDITS MORE

THE MANDALORIAN is the ultimate space Western. And we'll challenge you to a showdown at sundown if you disagree WORDS DAN JOLIN

GEORGE LUCAS' GALAXY far, far away has always gone a little bit West. From the frontier-saloon styling of the Mos Eisley Cantina to Boba Fett's unmistakable Spaghetti flavour (right down to his poncho-like cape and the Clint Eastwood squint of his visor), the Western has been in the saga's postmodern mythical mix since its inception. But it has never been so obvious — essential, even — than in *The Mandalorian*.

The setting is pure Wild West. Not only because it skims around the scummy, villainous Outer Rim, where neither Empire nor New Republic are able to impose law and civilisation. But also temporally. The Western era is very narrow, very specific, briefly emerging from the chaos and rubble of a vast, intense Civil War. Ring a bell?

The show's hero, or rather anti-hero, is a Western archetype clad in beskar. He's even occasionally portrayed by Brendan Wayne, grandson of John Wayne, who doubles for Pedro Pascal. But that's circumstantial; really it goes deeper. Like the cowboys of Western myth, the


Mandalorians are specialised professionals whose way of life is vanishing. Like the eponymous hero of 1953 ur-Western *Shane*, they are treated with cautious respect, welcomed only for as long as their deadly skills are required.

Mando himself is a highly capable, laconic loner, drifting through dusty, scuff-edged frontier towns and bringing a modicum of relief and progress to their beleaguered residents — even if his motives appear, on the cold, hard surface, strictly selfish. “The image of the Mandalorian is a deconstructed version of Clint Eastwood's *The Man With No Name*,” confirmed show creator Jon Favreau — a filmmaker who'd already dabbled in sci-fi/Western mash-ups with 2011's *Cowboys & Aliens*.

Instead of a six-shooter, Mando packs a blaster pistol. Instead of a Winchester 1866, he wields an Amban sniper rifle. His fibre-cord whip is basically a high-tech lasso. And if the character's physical resemblance to the poncho-wearing gunslinger of Sergio Leone's arid West somehow isn't enough to convince you, then consider this: in each of his three movies,






Top to bottom:
 A Tusken Raider
 on Tatooine's
 answer to a horse
 — a bantha;
 Timothy Olyphant
 as Cobb Vanth
 (aka The Marshal)
 with Mando in the
 Season 2 opener.

The Man With No Name actually had a name. And in the film which presented him as a bounty hunter, *For A Few Dollars More*, that name was Manco. That's right. Just one letter different.

Of course, another important influence on the show, and on Lucas before it, was samurai cinema. Mando is as much an Akira Kurosawa ronin as he is a Sergio Leone gunslinger. But *chanbara* and Westerns entwine like the double helix of *Star Wars* DNA. If Mando is The Man With No Name, then he is also Yojimbo. If Season 1 episode 'Sanctuary' channels *The Seven Samurai*, it also evokes *The Magnificent Seven*. Still, due in no small part to the predominating choice of vista, the Western half of that helix feels the stronger. Vast, stark and inhospitable, a key location is Death Valley, whose sunbaked badlands played host to countless oaters, including John Sturges' *The Walking Hills*, Henry King's *The Gunfighter* and John Ford's *3 Godfathers*.

The last of these movies is particularly notable, in that it involves a rough trio of cattle rustlers (among them Brendan's grandpappy)

who become reluctant guardians to a baby. No bounties for spotting the connection there. In fact, *The Mandalorian* is almost as replete with Western deep cuts as it is *Star Wars*-lore Easter eggs. Mando's taming of the blurr in the first episode is straight out of *The Big Country*. The guest star of Season 2 opener 'The Marshal' is *Deadwood* sheriff Timothy Olyphant — clad in Boba Fett's distinctive beskar, no less — while that chapter flagrantly equates Tatooine's Tusken Raiders with Native Americans.

Even the end credits are Western-influenced. As Ludwig Göransson's low-slung theme (inspired by Ennio Morricone) plays, we're treated to a slow montage of concept-art stills: a perfect match for how late-'60s TV show *The High Chaparral* plays out.

Just two seasons in, it already feels like there's hardly a Western trope untouched by *The Mandalorian's* gauntlet. In fact, with the genre now so rarely explored (if only *Godless* hadn't been a limited series), let's go one further: this show ain't merely the ultimate space Western. It's the best Western, full stop, in town right now. 

ΔΕΛΤΑ

WORDS **HELEN O'HARA** ILLUSTRATION **ALIYAH ALLEN**

The most obvious candidate for a live-action TV show was always Obi-Wan. Ewan McGregor is still-popular casting from his role in the prequels, and this series will slot neatly into the middle of the missing 20 years in the Jedi Master's life. Presumably his mission will partly involve keeping the secret of young Luke and Leia's existence from their father, with Hayden Christensen (somehow) returning as Darth Vader. With *The Mandalorian's* Deborah Chow directing and *The Alienist's* Hossein Amini on screenwriting duties, we're mostly hoping to learn how he came up with his cunning alias: 'Ben'.



If you liked Diego Luna's Cassian Andor but wish we'd seen more of him before his — spoiler — untimely end in *Rogue One*, good news! He and sarky battle droid K-2SO (Alan Tudyk) will return in a new, limited series. *The Americans'* Stephen Schiff is showrunning, which seems like an inspired choice for a morally murky character in a story described as a spy thriller (remember when Cassian shot his informer in cold blood? That show's Elizabeth and Philip would be proud). Promised flashbacks to Cassian's childhood, and his relationship with his sister, may explain his passionate hatred of the Empire — but it's that spy element that sounds most fun. If *The Mandalorian* showed that this galaxy

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

There's a new animated spin-off planned from the franchise's small-screen success stories, *Clone Wars* and *Rebels*. It's the story of Clone Force 99, a commando squad of not-quite-clones formed during the Clone Wars. This "bad" batch of clones were not perfect recreations of Jango Fett like the rest of their army, but elite soldiers designed with special skills: sheer muscle (Wrecker), enhanced aim (Crosshair), more brainpower (Tech) or extrasensory abilities (their leader, Hunter). But after the War ends and the Empire rises, they must find a new way to survive as mercenaries and seek a new purpose. Expect them to be tasked with hunting down, or helping, familiar figures in the *Star Wars* universe, in a show that looks — physically as well as morally — darker than its *Clone Wars* progenitor.



In April 2020 Lucasfilm announced that *Russian Doll*'s Leslye Headland would be creating a “female-centric” series that will, she says, take place “in a pocket of the universe and a pocket of the timeline that we don’t know much about”. We now know



that's the High Republic era that lasted from about 300 to 100 years before the Skywalker saga takes place. That was a time when the Outer Rim was still sparsely populated and unsettled but the Jedi were active across the galaxy, a rare moment in the *Star Wars* timeline when the good guys were on the back foot. But the prospect of exploring any new facet of *Star Wars* chronology has us more excited than a tip-yp on Life Day Eve.



As soon as she was cast, there were rumours that Rosario Dawson's Ahsoka Tano might get her own live-action series — and sure enough, it's happening, with Dave Filoni, the character's



creator and guiding force, on writing duties. A spin-off from *The Mandalorian*, there have been reports that this will involve the blue-skinned Grand Admiral Thrawn in some capacity — rumours that pre-date her mention of his name in the show. As the stand-out fan favourite of the animated world, an Ahsoka live-action series is a no-brainer, and Dawson's first appearance in the role only whet our appetite further.



RANGERS OF THE NEW REPUBLIC

Why settle for one *Mandalorian* spin-off when you can have two? This effort, with Dave Filoni and Jon Favreau back in charge, will focus on the

titular law-keepers (we think?) and, we're told, intersect with its parent show's timeline before building to a "climactic story event". So that is enlightening. There was speculation that this could focus on characters such as Gina Carano's Cara Dune, now a marshal of the New Republic, but file that under "extremely unconfirmed" for now.



VISIONS

If you loved *The Animatrix* and are hyped for Marvel's *What If...?*, this might be the *Star Wars* animation you've been hoping for. We're promised a celebration of the galaxy far away via "ten fantastic visions" from leading anime

studios, and a "diverse cultural perspective". We're hoping for full-on *Akira* levels of weirdness, but in space.



LANDO

The galaxy got one more injection of cool with the news that Justin Simien of *Dear White People* is developing a limited-run show about everyone's favourite cape enthusiast, Lando Calrissian. It's not yet confirmed whether this means the return of Donald Glover, Billy Dee Williams or both in some sort of time-hopping/story-bookending fashion, but surely at least one of them will be back, and space designers everywhere will be delighted.



A DROID STORY

Promising a mixture of "visual effects and animation" (isn't that just CG animation?), this new series will see a new hero "guided by" C3PO and R2-D2. The current animated *Lego Star Wars: Droid Tales* are delightful, so we are hoping for more cheery bickering from the mismatched droid legends and a hapless newbie caught in the middle.



ROGUE SQUADRON

The *Star Wars* franchise continues to address its lack of female directors by hiring *Wonder Woman*'s Patty Jenkins to direct this feature film about an X-wing squadron for 2023. And it's a personal project for the filmmaker, whose father, Captain William T. Jenkins, served in the US Air Force. "I love to move fast, and speed of any kind," Jenkins says. "I think that's because I grew up the daughter of a great fighter pilot, and every day I would wake up and go outside and look up, and I would see my father and his squadron take off in their F4s, roaring across the sky." Expect it to be a high-velocity thrill-ride that would have Pete 'Maverick' Mitchell looking on with envy.



UNTITLED TAIKA WAITITI PROJECT

We don't know much about this beyond Lucasfilm President Kathleen Kennedy's assertion that it will be "fresh, unexpected and... unique". But it's Taika Waititi, so how much more do we need? Expect something weirder and more comic than usual. The tales of IG-11's career in nursing, a sort of *Mr. Mom* with an assassin droid? Honestly, we don't care — just sign us up. **E**

THE MANDALORIAN EMPIRE EXCLUSIVE

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OF THE CHILD NOW

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Lightning-fast rapper.

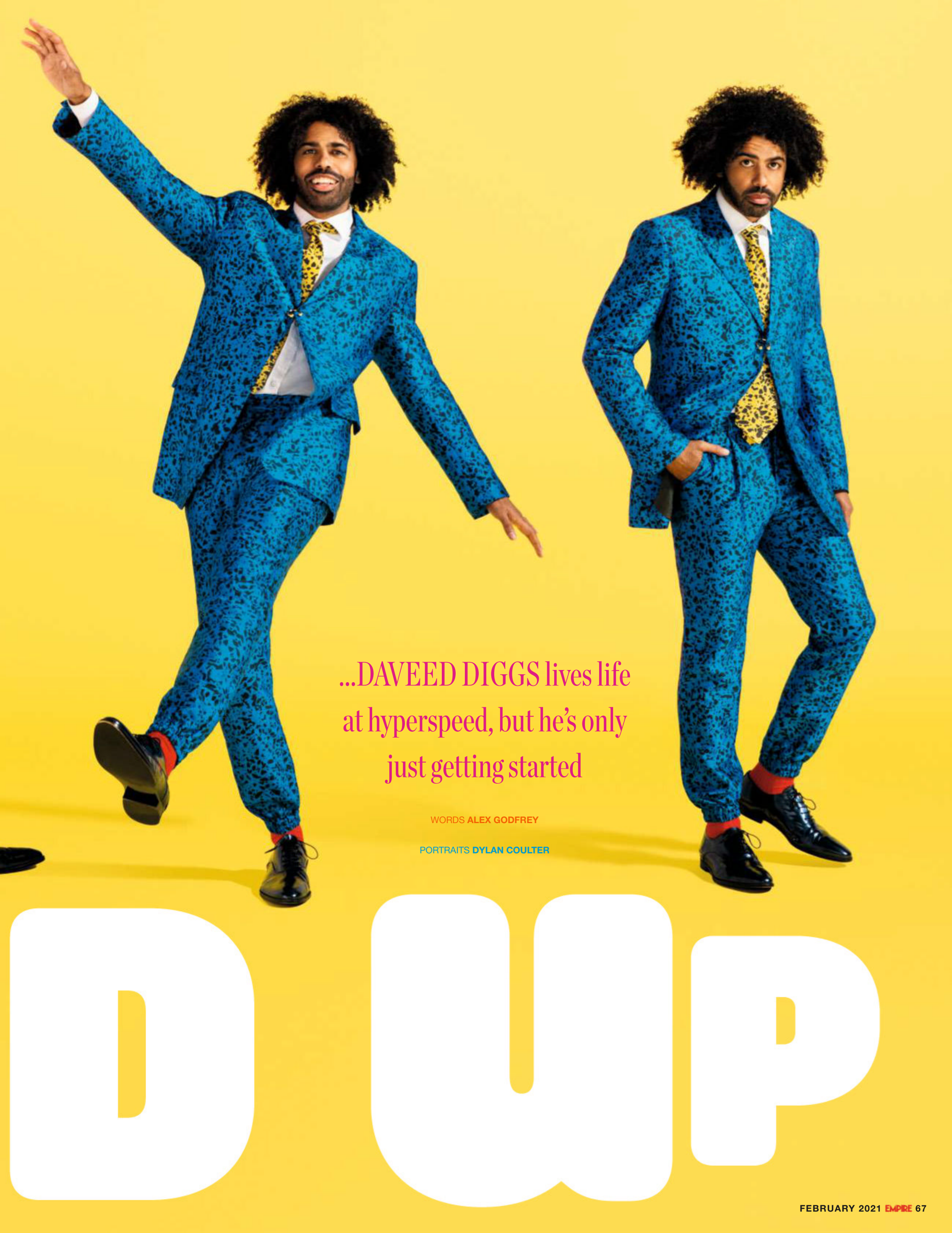


World-class orator.

Fighter of injustice...

Daveed Diggs, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in Griffith Park, Los Angeles, on 22 October 2020, following current social-distancing and public health guidelines.

empire



...DAVEED DIGGS lives life
at hyperspeed, but he's only
just getting started

WORDS ALEX GODFREY

PORTRAITS DYLAN COULTER

DUPLICATE

On stage, on screen, on vinyl, Daveed Diggs crackles.

He has a built-in vibrancy — constantly alert, he's a big-brained energy drink, a wide-eyed one-man army. But it's the voice that really cuts through. It sounds like metal.

That voice was the making of him. He was a shy, awkward fourth-grader when he first realised what he could do. Every week a teacher had them memorise poems, and finally the ten-year-old Diggs stood up and recited one, projecting, exclaiming. His classmates laughed in all the right places; he loved it. He felt confident, empowered. More significantly, everybody was listening. It changed his life.

"The meter and the cadence and the rhyme-scheme forces your ear to hear things," he explains now of spoken word, and of that revelatory moment. "And for a kid, when nobody particularly wants to listen to you, if you can make something that is virtuosic... it forces people to listen to you."

Today, everybody's listening. In 2016 Diggs was said to be, thanks to a verse in *Hamilton's* 'Guns And Ships', the fastest rapper on Broadway (more of which later). His virtuosity — specifically some desperate, furious spoken verse — underpinned *Blindspotting*, the battle-cry film he spent a decade co-writing. More recently, for Ethan Hawke's pre-Civil War TV drama *The Good Lord Bird*, Hawke handpicked Diggs to play Frederick Douglass, the world's greatest orator. Who else?

Diggs is using his voice to great effect, choosing — and creating — roles that mean something to him. He's had a humble journey and he is not, he tells *Empire*, throwing away his shot.

I'VE HAD A lot of really great teachers, and in a lot of ways they saved my life," Diggs says. He's been reflecting on his youth, when he overcame his shyness through poetry, then spoken word, then rap. He grew up in Oakland, California, to a white mother and Black father, "poor but not bored, and not sad". A handful of mentors recognised his talent, pushing him to improve.

"When you become a teenager, you have to find something," he explains. "Because you're constructing an identity for yourself, and the things that you latch onto at that age are things that you do. 'I play sports, so do these people, so that's my identity.' 'I do drugs, so do these people, so that's my identity.' Having teachers who acknowledged me as an artist allowed me to have that identity. And that's at the point where your surroundings start to matter. The other things to get involved in were not necessarily a ticket to success."

Diggs became a teacher himself when he was trying to break through, after graduating in theatre arts from Brown University in 2004. He taught poetry and acting to middle-school kids, and created a rap curriculum for them. He had been rapping since he was 12, and in 2010 joined the experimental hip hop group Clipping; he had a lot to discuss, then, when in 2012 he was booked as a substitute teacher for a class and another teacher and rapper, Anthony Veneziale, was erroneously booked for the same kids. And once again Diggs' life was changed.

Veneziale and Diggs taught the class together that day, hung out afterwards, and within time, Veneziale invited Diggs to join the improvisational rap group he was in, Freestyle Love Supreme. There Diggs met Lin-Manuel Miranda, who'd already had a hit musical with *In The Heights*, was cooking up *Hamilton* and, dazzled by Diggs' skills, asked him to join the workshops. Diggs, who was trying to catch a break in New York — sleeping on friends' couches, napping on subway trains when there were no couches available, delivering fajitas for a catering company at 5am, going to auditions — certainly needed a gig, but thought

Below: Diggs breaking out in Broadway mega-hit *Hamilton*, here as Thomas Jefferson.
Bottom: As reformed offender Collin alongside Rafael Casal's Miles in 2018's *Blindspotting*; the two friends co-wrote the film.



Previous page: Suit and tie by Dirty Pineapple, shirt by Rag & Bone, socks by London Sock Company and shoes by Angela Mitchell.
This page: Jacket, shirt and pants by Issey Miyake.





Hamilton, using hip hop, as he saw it, to teach history, was a terrible idea. He loved Miranda though, loved witnessing him at work in Freestyle Love Supreme. “He’s brilliant,” Diggs says. “He’s got so much energy and he’s genuinely funny and so charming. He’s just that dude. Watching him in Freestyle is like watching an animal in its natural habitat.” So he agreed to take part in the *Hamilton* workshops.

It didn’t take him long to realise how good it was. Miranda sent him the song demos, in which he performed all the roles, and Diggs was impressed with the passion and sincerity. “I was wrong about it being a bad idea,” he laughs.

Miranda asked Diggs to play two roles in *Hamilton*: in Act 1, French expat Marquis de Lafayette, and then in Act 2, an enormously extravagant Thomas Jefferson. In fact, Miranda had shaped the roles around Diggs, playing to his strengths — certainly his charisma, and definitely his vocal dexterity. “What [director] Tommy Kail and Lin told me later was, ‘We knew something that audiences didn’t: we knew that we had this ringer, that you existed. They didn’t know you existed. So we wanted to write you into that space. It makes everybody look good.’”

Hamilton kicked off in 2015, hitting Broadway later that year. People calling Diggs the fastest rapper on Broadway was, to him, an empty accolade. “I had a hard time accepting the acclaim that came along with my performance. Because the rapping, my special skill — that’s easy, that was lower-level stuff. I’ve done more impressive rapping in my life!” He was afraid the rap community would find it corny; they didn’t.

Diggs won a Tony for his work, and an ensemble Grammy with the cast. But there was another sense of dissatisfaction. At last, at 33, he was successful — incredibly so — but he hadn’t written *Hamilton*. It wasn’t his. Bubbling up though, was something that was.

B

LINDSPOTTING WAS BORN in 2007. Diggs’ friend and frequent collaborator Rafael Casal — they’d been at the same school, and made albums, plays and web series together — had been asked by producer Jess Calder to think about writing a screenplay. She’d seen a video of Casal performing his poem *Monster* on YouTube,

about death and numbness, and asked him if there might be a film in utilising such spoken verse. Three years later she saw Diggs perform too, and said it should involve both of them; the pair went to work on it, writing about their Oakland background, about police brutality, gentrification and friendship.

“We didn’t know anything about making a movie,” Diggs says. “We just started writing. We didn’t know enough of the rules to know we were breaking any rules. We were trying to get Oakland represented on screen in a way that felt honest, and the best way to do that was to have as much rhythm and cadence in the voice as possible, because that’s just how we talk.”

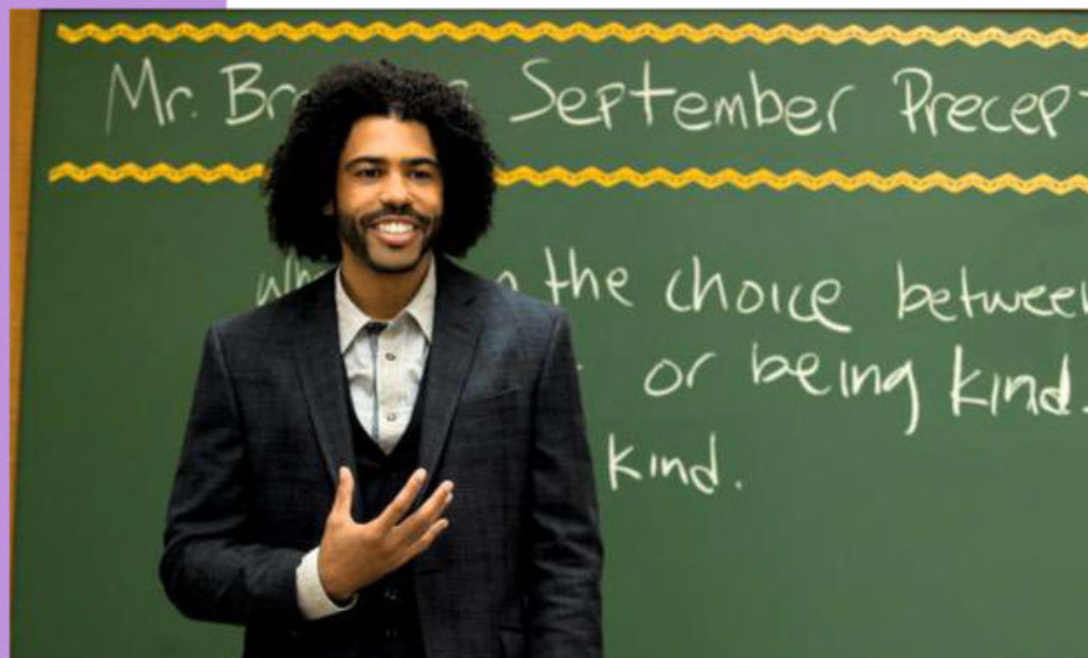
Blindspotting swirls around Collin (Diggs), a young man on probation, desperate to stay out of trouble, not helped by his reckless best friend, Miles (Casal). Collin witnesses police shooting an unarmed Black man, and is then plagued by his own inaction. The film was influenced by real-world events, not least the fact that, for a few years in his early twenties, Diggs, in an old car and a big afro, was pulled over by police almost 40 times. *Blindspotting* was personal. 2009, the year he and Casal started writing it, also saw the fatal police shooting of the unarmed Oscar Grant in an Oakland subway station — four blocks from where Diggs lived. He was there for the marches and protests; it seismically influenced the film.

It was finally ready to shoot in 2015, but then *Hamilton* came along. After that, Diggs was in demand, taking on TV roles in Kenya Barris’ *Black-ish*, Baz Luhrmann’s *The Get Down* and Tina Fey’s *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, and in the 2017 film *Wonder* (in which he played a teacher, with a performance inspired by the teachers who encouraged him). In 2017, they finally went for it, with Carlos López Estrada, who had directed some of Diggs and Casal’s online work, behind the camera.

Blindspotting, ten years in the making, felt ever relevant. Diggs and Casal had kept writing it over the years, consistently updating it, right up to the wire. This summer, with the murder of George Floyd and the amplification of Black Lives Matter, it struck a chord all over again. For Diggs, though, the feelings he was exploring in the film had been a constant presence. “Those emotions never left, for me,” he says. “For most Black people in America, that’s not a thing we take a break from. I’m very happy that *Blindspotting* exists and when George Floyd was murdered, the amount of people pointing to it and saying, ‘Watch this,’ or, ‘I just watched this and it gave me some clarity on the situation’ — I’m very glad for that. But the resurgence of interest in Black Lives Matter has an element of frustration for me. A lot of people were coming to me and saying, ‘You have to say something.’ And I was like, ‘I’ve been saying this same thing for ten years. And spent ten years making a movie about it that exists. My position hasn’t changed.’”

He laughs, frustrated with the stasis. “I feel the same way about this as I have for my whole life! Every time I’ve been pulled over by a police officer for no reason I’ve had the same response. It doesn’t change. So there is an element of frustration, but I try to >

Below:
With Laurence
Fishburne in
Kenya Barris’
sitcom *Black-ish*.
Bottom: As
inspirational
teacher Mr.
Browne in
Wonder (2017)
— Diggs was
himself
a teacher.



This page: Suit, polo shirt and sneakers by Versace.

moderate it because overall it is positive to continue to be able to shed light on issues that are real for all of us.”

As the title suggests, *Blindspotting* is about working to understand someone else’s lived experience. To see those blindspots. In 2020, many people began to do that a little more. Diggs is pleased the film is still resonating. “I like to make things,” he says. “They’re not always useful, and I’m not always chasing things that are useful, either. But it is gratifying when people find a piece of art that you made useful. We saw the same thing with ‘Chapter 319’, the Clipping song that we put out as a protest song to be used at the marches that were happening in response to Floyd’s murder.”

The lyrics of ‘Chapter 319’ were straightforward, with lines directly referring to Floyd’s murder and the environment that enabled it. “Donald Trump is a white supremacist, full stop,” rapped Diggs. “If you vote for him again you’re a white supremacist, full stop.” The protestors embraced it, and it raised thousands of dollars for racial justice charities. It was useful.

D

IGGS IS TIRED. You wouldn’t know it — during *Empire*’s conversation he’s utterly engaged, despite it being 6.30am in Vancouver. He’s up early to talk before hitting the set of *Snowpiercer*, the television adaptation of Bong Joon-ho’s wild sci-fi drama about a train perpetually shooting across a frozen Earth. Diggs, who plays the

lead, homicide detective/emerging revolutionary/ formidable ass-kicker Andre Layton, is nearing the end of filming Season 2, having returned after a few months of Covid-inflicted hiatus.

“I feel exhausted most of the time,” he laughs, responding to allegations of boundless energy. He’s constantly working, he says, because when he’s not acting for other people, he can’t stop creating. “As I get older and start thinking about starting a family, I don’t want to always be running like this. But sometimes, the idea is *so good!* And I really want it to exist!” he laughs.

Bong’s vision carries through to the show in interesting ways, says Diggs. “A lot of Director Bong’s films are personal stories about social structure. About the mechanisms of class and how that affects real people. That is very much in the DNA of our *Snowpiercer*. It’s about the human cost of class.” And if you’re going to explore class, at some point it’s going to have to involve race too, he says, despite discourse in the US awkwardly separating the two. “The truth of America is that those things are connected. There’s no economy without the slave trade.”

This is something he’s brought up behind the scenes on *Snowpiercer*: that the show could benefit from looking at racial politics. In the film, the equivalent character was played by Chris Evans. Layton wasn’t written for a Black man, but with Diggs cast, he wants to get into it. “There are different opportunities when the leader of your revolution happens to be Black,” he says. “There’s an opportunity to write into those things more, but also to try and do it responsibly, given how few people of colour are in the writers’ room. Being able to speak to the complicated reality of our world is an opportunity. Diversity in all aspects of production shouldn’t be a burden. It is an opportunity to tell stories better, and more deeply.”

Such opportunities to get involved are growing for Diggs — he only ended up voicing a role in Pixar’s *Soul* because the studio invited him to be part of their “cultural council” a few years back. “This is their first film with a Black protagonist, so they invited Black artists and community members in to watch early animatics of the show,” he says. “And give notes on how we felt about it. And they really listened.”

Since he was a kid, people have been listening to Diggs. And if *Hamilton* was his big breakthrough as a performer, since *Blindspotting*, different doors have opened. “Once you make something, you end up being spoken to a different way,” he says. “It’s, ‘Holy shit, this person made something and other people put money in it.’ The nature of the meetings I was having changed from, ‘We have this thing you might be good for,’ to, ‘What do you want to do?’”

One thing he wanted to do was more *Blindspotting* — namely, a television show, again written by Diggs and Casal, with the same producers and cast. Shooting now, it focuses on Ashley, Miles’ long-suffering girlfriend from the film, played by Jasmine Cephas Jones (who starred in *Hamilton* alongside Diggs). “So we’re writing for her now, and not really for us in the same way,” says Diggs. “We’re expanding her world and exploring what she’s going through.”

As with all of the work he creates, he wants it to be challenging. He likes playing complex characters in complex situations, in films and shows that credit their audiences with intelligence. And it all comes from those that did the same for him. “All of my teachers were like, ‘You’re a really smart, talented person — you should exist in that space. Stop pretending that that isn’t true.’ So I don’t want to spoon-feed you something, I want you to have to do the work to really enjoy it. Because it shows us what we’re capable of.”

The kid who was inspired to be the best that he could be is just passing it on. 🎬

SOUL IS ON DISNEY+ FROM 25 DECEMBER



Below:
As detective
Andre Layton in
Snowpiercer.
Bottom: Diggs
voices Paul
(right), nemesis
of music teacher
Joe (Jamie
Foxx), in
Pixar’s *Soul*.

This page: Coat and pants by Moschino, sweatshirt by Everlane, glasses by Dan Deutch. Styling: John Tan and Kendall Spina.
Hair: By Neeko @ Tracey Mattingly. Grooming by Joanna Simkin @ The Wall Group using. Covid Compliance Officer: Ethan Roy.
Location: Quixote Studios, Griffith Park, Los Angeles.







PICKING UP THE PIECES

THE TALE OF A MOTHER
EXPERIENCING
A TERRIBLE LOSS,
PIECES OF A WOMAN
CAN BE HARROWING
TO WATCH. BUT, AS ITS
CREATORS AND STAR
EXPLAIN, IT'S REALLY
ABOUT HOPE

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

IF YOU WERE relying on Bond to deliver the most bracing pre-title sequence of 2021, prepare to be blindsided by *Pieces Of A Woman*. No sooner will you have settled in your seat than Martha — a blonde, heavily pregnant woman played with career-topping commitment by Vanessa Kirby — starts to scrunch up her face in pain and pace her elegantly-lit Boston apartment.

An uncut 24-minute birth scene unspools from here. In that time, Martha's eyes roll in and out of focus. She swears and apologises and asks if the bin has been taken out, while her partner Sean (Shia LaBeouf) tries desperately to be helpful. Most of all, though, Martha burps. "A lot of women have thanked me for the burping, which I really wasn't expecting," says Kirby from her home in London. "It's just so nice that it's >



not an edited version of what the female experience is.”

It’s a bold choice to take on a film this dark and demanding, especially when this is Kirby’s first leading feature role. After the back-arching intensity of the birth, Martha’s pregnancy ends in paralysing heartbreak and forces her into a fugue state over a bitter, solitary winter. Yet the actress — who won the Volpi Cup at Venice International Film Festival for her performance — was ravenous for a story like Martha’s.

“I just thought, ‘I really have to do this,’” Kirby remembers. “I’d never seen the process of giving birth and this reaction to trauma on screen in this way before. I felt this responsibility and duty to women and families who have lost in that way.”

Director Kornél Mundruczó had told Martha’s story once before, in a Polish stage play written by his longstanding collaborator and partner, Kata Wéber.

The character first came to life, however, in a few scraps of dialogue that Wéber had scribbled down after she had terminated a pregnancy. “It was a very different experience to what’s seen in the film, but it was still a loss for me,” she explains. “As a couple we could hardly deal with it, and we never talked about it. It made me interested in the taboos that exist around grieving and motherhood and death around the world.”

Mundruczó found those fragments of dialogue and saw in them a chance to dismantle the silence that had overshadowed their experience and address those taboos face on. He asked Wéber to write the play, which proved enough of a success in Poland to convince them to adapt *Pieces Of A Woman* into their first English-language film.

While working on the screenplay, which significantly expanded on the play, Wéber spoke with psychiatrists and women who had lost babies, but she was nervous: the dark and

Above: Martha (Vanessa Kirby) returns to work after her loss;
Right: Ellen Burstyn plays Martha’s mother, Elizabeth.



confronting corners that her story went to seemed risky to people that she spoke to. She questioned if Hollywood was ready for this challenging new female perspective. “I believe there’s a certain way that we want to see a mother’s grief after a tragedy,” she speculates. “We want to see them move on and go back to their previous lives. But some people don’t want to move on, because that’s how they stay connected to what’s happened. That’s how they feel more alive.”

Fortunately, Wéber and Mundruczó found someone who was up to the challenge: *Arrival* producer Aaron Ryder, who passed the script along to co-producers Ashley Levinson and Kevin Turen, who then optioned the film. LaBeouf came on board first as Sean, a blue-collar recovering alcoholic who describes himself as “boorish” in the film. Kirby joined shortly after, having been passed the script by Levinson’s husband and *Euphoria* creator, Sam. “I’d met with them both and told them that I was

really looking to do something like *A Woman Under The Influence*,” she explains. “Gena Rowlands is my biggest inspiration.”

Kirby’s career kickstarted after portraying glamorous rule-breaker Princess Margaret in the first two seasons of *The Crown*, before splintering off into lucrative action franchises. She’d held her own against wardrobe-sized co-stars like Dwayne Johnson and Jason Statham in *Fast & Furious: Hobbs & Shaw*, and committed to not one but three *Mission: Impossible* movies as the skilled and elusive White Widow. Stepping into Martha’s shoes presented her with her biggest challenge yet: to convincingly portray childbirth as someone who had never done it herself. Kirby shadowed an obstetrician on a labour ward and a birthing coach was flown over from Portland for the shoot, but she was still daunted by the task. “I’d done tons of research,” she says, “but I had no idea if we could pull it off, and we only had two days to shoot it.”



Above right: Martha in the aftermath of the tragedy. **Right:** Shia LaBeouf as Sean. **Below:** Director Kornél Mundruczó and members of the cast on set.



As if the stakes weren't high enough, Mundruczó — keen to capture the early energy of his cast — made the ambitious call to film the birthing scene on the first two days of the shoot. Ahead of their first day on set — an apartment in Montreal that subbed for Boston — nerves were fraying. “I don’t think that Shia and I got much sleep the night before, honestly,” Kirby admits. “Then on the morning of the shoot we were so jittery. It was like doing the first night of a play.”

The mechanics of the sequence were planned out vigorously, but rehearsals were purposefully kept on the light side. For one, LaBeouf — a known Method actor — wanted to save as much energy as he could for the shoot itself. For Mundruczó, less rehearsal time meant more room for small errors, something he insists is a good thing. “We always tried to include uncertainties or little mistakes,” he says. “For example, in the last take of the first day, Shia forgot his phone and had to run out of the room, and some of the composition is delayed. The next

day the takes were more perfect, but the same spirit wasn’t there.”

The scene’s emotional foundation was laid by Wéber, who clocked up around 25 pages of the script on the sequence. “I wanted to write down the raw experience of giving birth; the sheer beauty and terror of it.” A lot of what makes it onto the screen, however, was improvised by the cast: Kirby, LaBeouf and Molly Parker, who plays the midwife. “We had a map of where to be, and then we’d freefall and see what happened,” says Kirby. “Shia is the best improviser that I’ve ever worked with. There’s a joke that he makes about a salad bar in the film that makes me laugh even thinking about it now.”

Behind the camera, things weren’t quite as off-the-cuff. A limited space meant limited crew for filming: just two boom operators and cinematographer Benjamin Loeb, who upon Mundruczó’s insistence also acted as the camera operator. The director wanted the camerawork to bring a “spiritual” element to the sequence, and so he and Loeb opted for a gimbal — a lightweight Steadicam alternative that created a less jarring effect than a handheld camera — to work with. “Mundruczó was worried about how the subject matter would be received, as it’s so rarely seen on screen, so he consciously set out to make a film that wasn’t painful to watch digitally,” says Loeb. “He wanted the realism of a Richard Bresson movie, but with the classic actor melodrama of Rainer Werner Fassbinder.”

Across those two testing days, only six takes were filmed: four on the first day, two on the second. Mundruczó describes the experience as extremely emotional. Wéber adopted the role of an expectant father on set; supportive but helpless while her husband was tasked with doing all the work. In between takes, Kirby says that she would sit with her headphones on and listen to a playlist she’d made, packed with songs about expectancy and birth, to help bottle the energy that she needed for the remaining takes. “I couldn’t even access that playlist in my head now. It would be too painful.”

Regardless, she considers those days to be among the most exhilarating of her life; a chance to step into a world that she describes as “supernatural”, without interruption, and live through a vivid experience. “I hadn’t literally given birth,” she says, “but in some parts of my psyche I had.”

Pieces Of A Woman continued to defy the odds by receiving its world premiere at the Venice International Film Festival in September 2020. Mundruczó still considers this to be a miracle, given that large parts of the world were still in lockdown. “It was a little island in the ocean that’s been this pandemic,” he recalls.

There have been rave reviews, and Oscar predictions are already swirling around Kirby’s dedicated performance, but it’s the film’s ripple effect that has touched the cast and crew most. On the morning of *Empire*’s interview with Kirby, a message had been forwarded to her via her sister from a family friend, who had watched the film’s trailer the day before. “It said: ‘I lost a baby two years ago, and I’ve never spoken about it. I’m so grateful that the film is representing that part of life.’”

For Mundruczó and Wéber, this bold feat of storytelling born from personal anguish has done exactly what they’d hoped it would: changed the conversation around women who have undergone unspeakable loss. “We took a huge risk making this film, because to do it right you have to go to a place which is very dark and very dangerous,” says Wéber. “But all of the stories that we’re hearing back is a sign to me that we managed to do it.”

As you subconsciously curl your fists up during that traumatic first chapter of Martha’s story and the turmoil that follows, you may struggle to call *Pieces Of A Woman* a hopeful film, but Mundruczó has no doubt in his mind that it is.

“Even to tell a story like this feels like hope,” he says. “When you’re able to crush the silence, that’s hope. In my opinion, this can’t be anything but an optimistic movie.” Through the efforts of this band of first-timers and chancers, this bold, radical and yes, hopeful, film is already one of the most talked-about of the year. As long as it’s for the right reasons, that’s okay with them. 🍷

PIECES OF A WOMAN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 30 DECEMBER AND ON NETFLIX FROM 7 JANUARY

BYE, BYE  2020



THE YEAR THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING



It began with South Korea storming the Oscars and ended with Hollywood in freefall. And despite all the turbulence, there was plenty of movie magic along the way. We chart cinema's year of drama, starting with an overview of just what happened

WORDS AL HORNER

ILLUSTRATION MIKE CATHRO

DANIEL — NOT HIS REAL NAME — remembers the days when he used to sell tickets to stories about planet-threatening catastrophes. In 2020, he and his colleagues found themselves at the centre of one. "It sounds like a movie, doesn't it?" asks the currently furloughed employee of a north London chain cinema, who recalls a bright start of the year for his multiplex. "People were queuing up for *1917* and buzzing to see *Parasite*. One of our regulars had seen *JoJo Rabbit* six times." Then came coronavirus, closing cinemas across the UK and plunging the industry into uncertainty. "It's gutting — and not just because I don't know how much longer I'll have a job for. I hate going past and seeing the lights off and everything shut up. There's something so unnatural about not being able to go to the pictures, to disappear in the dark in front of a blockbuster."

He has a point. Covid-19 has been described as the biggest disruption to British life since World War II. The truth is, not even wartime posed as big a threat to UK film. When Britain went to war with Germany in 1939, cinemas shut for two weeks, before reopening and reporting record numbers. This time around, movie-lovers have been stuck at home for much of 2020, with only their streaming services and Blu-ray collections for company. Cinemas have temporarily closed. Productions have paused. Film workers across all corners of the industry have been left without income, and audiences have been left wondering when — and crucially, where — the tentpole movies they've been excited for will see the light of day.

"It's been a total rupture," says Tricia Tuttle, director of festivals at the BFI — one of countless institutions that have had to urgently adapt. In March, Tuttle found herself informed the UK was going into lockdown — days before the start of BFI Flare, a festival dedicated to LGBTQ+ voices in film. "We had three days to virtualise the entire event, moving it all online," she recalls. This was to be a recurring feature of film in 2020, as studios moved planned theatrical releases like *The Invisible Man* and *Mulan* onto home-rental services, and services like Netflix, Mubi, Prime Video and the newly launched Disney+ went from strength to strength.

Streaming was already booming before Covid-19 struck, says Craig Engler, general manager of horror streaming platform Shudder. "Lockdown took what was already a blazing fire and poured gasoline on it," he explains. "Across the board, all streaming services saw a huge rise in interest."

The decision to move movie releases online — or in the case of *No Time To Die*, *Black Widow*, *Ghostbusters: Afterlife* and others, to delay them entirely — caused huge fractures. Cinema chains complained of being left high and dry by studios who didn't want to release their movies while multiplexes were under-strength. And in April, the entire movie-release ecosystem almost combusted in an argument over a band of guitar-wielding, spiky-haired '90s play-toys. When *Trolls World Tour* skipped cinemas and went straight to VOD, AMC, the largest cinema chain in the US, announced a boycott of the studio that created it, Universal.

While all this was playing out, seeds of hope began to sprout. On 1 July, cinemas were cleared to reopen. On 11 July, *Jurassic World: Dominion* became the first UK production to resume shooting on heavily sanitised, regularly tested sets. Audiences began to trickle back to theatres, reassured by new safety measures. And in August came *Tenet* — released in theatres at last after a series of date changes. "Huge credit has to go to Christopher Nolan," says Vue Cinemas founder Tim Richards. "He's a massive supporter of cinema-going. He wanted to do his part to get people back into cinemas, and what we saw was a pent-up demand to see movies on the big screen."

The absence of massive blockbusters, *Tenet* aside, left room this year for indie movies to become breakout successes. “*Saint Maud* had a day in the middle of its release when it was number one,” recalls Tuttle. “That wouldn’t have happened in a year where films with infinite marketing budgets were being released. There’s more room for greater flora and fauna.” There’s been great hardship in this period — but great resilience, too. “There’s been a lot of suffering and great people losing jobs. But what is positive is the spirit of innovation that we’ve seen. Fear has kept a lot of experimentation from happening previously. But we’ve had to do it this year, and there’ll be no going back from a lot of those changes. The industry’s finding ways to react.”

After much speculation, Warner Bros. did finally release its second major blockbuster since the pandemic began, *Wonder Woman 1984*, at cinemas just before Christmas — a much-needed blast of bright, big-hearted positivity, even if tier restrictions meant not everybody could enjoy it. In America, the studio got around that issue by first deciding that the movie would get a simultaneous streaming release via their HBO Max streaming service (“At some point you have to choose to share any love and joy you have to give, over everything else,” said director Patty Jenkins), then making the bombshell announcement that all of its planned major 2021 releases would go the same way. The decision drew criticism from exhibitors and some movie fans who feared what it could mean for cinemas. But at least in the UK, Warner Bros.’ slate still looks set to get a traditional cinema roll-out next year.

For all cinema’s transformations in 2020, one thing stayed the same. As the world entered lockdown in spring and again in the late autumn, film-lovers competed in online quizzes, watched Zoom cast reunions, used apps that helped them watch movies remotely with friends as if they were in the room, and remained as passionate as ever about the movies they love. “We have this incredible desire that wasn’t extinguished this year, to gather around culture and talk about what we’ve seen,” says Tuttle. “Cinema is such an important part of that.”

Richards agrees, and predicts the greatest year for cinemas on record when the virus is brought under control, thanks to a combination of “pent-up demand” and the amount of tentpole movies currently backlogged. “2021 was already going to be a good year with the titles coming out. *Drop Bond*, *Black Widow*, *Top Gun*, *Fast & Furious [9]* and so on into that, and I honestly think we’re about to see a second golden age of cinema.” 2020 has been hard, but film-lovers aren’t done disappearing in the dark yet. 

THE TENET

The inverted chronology of **CHRISTOPHER NOLAN’S** troubled time-twister

3 NOVEMBER 2020

After taking \$350 million worldwide, *Tenet* is seen by some commentators as a ‘flop’ and it remains unclear whether it’s broken even (factoring in marketing costs on top of the \$200 million budget). But Nolan tells the *Los Angeles Times* he’s delighted with the result. “Long-term, moviegoing is a part of life,” he says, “like restaurants and everything else. But right now, everybody has to adapt to a new reality.”

11 OCTOBER 2020

Following six weekends at the top of the US box-office chart, *Tenet* is toppled by Robert De Niro comedy *The War With Grandpa*.

26 AUGUST 2020

Tenet finally opens. It’s the first big Hollywood movie to light up cinemas since the pandemic started.

27 JULY 2020

Warner Bros. locks down a release date. With an appropriately inverted release model, *Tenet* will debut internationally on 26 August, then follow in select US cities from 3 September.

20 JULY 2020

In a shocking move, Warner Bros. removes *Tenet* from its release schedule. It can’t be treated as “a traditional global day-and-date release,” says studio chairman Toby Emmerich. It’s estimated each delay costs the studio between \$200,000 and \$400,000 in marketing fees.

25 JUNE 2020

Once again, *Tenet*’s release is delayed, to 12 August, after it becomes clear that neither Los Angeles nor New York City will be allowed to reopen cinemas in time.

12 JUNE 2020

After much conjecture about *Tenet* holding to its release date and bringing audiences back into empty multiplexes, Warner Bros. announces it will be delayed to 31 July.



TIMELINE



Clockwise from main:
Camera man: Christopher Nolan; If you can't stand the heat...; Nolan with John David Washington; Baby, you can ride (on top of) my car; The Protagonist gets to grips with an assailant.



20 MARCH 2020

The Washington Post publishes an op-ed by Nolan in which he argues that cinemas are “a vital part of social life, providing jobs for many and entertainment for all”.

18 MARCH 2020

California issues the United States' first stay-at-home order. With Covid-caused lockdown preventing composer Ludwig Göransson from gathering a full orchestra, he has to record all the musicians playing separately in their homes.

19 DECEMBER, 2019

In true Nolan style, an IMAX-only six-minute prologue is screened, ahead of *The Rise Of Skywalker*.

12 NOVEMBER 2019

Tenet wraps after a final stretch in California, during which Nolan destroys a real, decommissioned 747 at Victorville Airport (but not before fixing its brakes) and mounts the massive climactic battle at an old iron-ore mine in the ghost town of Eagle Mountain.

16 SEPTEMBER 2019

‘Merry Go Round’ reaches Mumbai at the end of monsoon season. Despite heavy rain and an ambitious upwards bungee-jump stunt at a high-rise in Breach Candy, Nolan's scheduled ten-day Indian shoot is done in five.

1 AUGUST 2019

Audiences get their first glimpse of Nolan's mysterious spy thriller during a surprise, 40-second teaser ahead of totally non-mysterious spy thriller *Hobbs & Shaw*. After a shot of John David Washington walking slowly towards a broken window, a tagline flashes up: “Time has come for a new protagonist.”

22 MAY 2019

Tenet starts shooting in Estonia under the working title of ‘Merry Go Round’. Apparently taking place in “the world of international espionage”, the production will visit seven countries in three continents, while Nolan and DP Hoyte van Hoytema will get through more than 1.6 million feet of IMAX film.

25 JANUARY 2019

Warner Bros. announces Christopher Nolan's next movie, giving no details but a release date: 17 July 2020. **DAN JOLIN**

2020 VISION



PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE

Terri White on being floored by a delicate film about the power of connection

It was just ten days since the birth of my son, and I was desperate to take him to the pictures. Show him what all of the fuss was about; a fuss he could expect to continue throughout his life. It would be my first and only visit to Baby Cinema (a genius invention) — the country going into lockdown due to the Covid pandemic just a week later. It would be my last visit to the cinema for four months. But what a way to go out — holding his small, warm body next to mine as the screen filled with director Céline Sciamma's sublime masterpiece. The story told so beautifully by Noémie Merlant and Adele Haenel, one of a painter and her subject. Of love, touch, but also, isolation. Of the language that those who hide their desire have to create to communicate, to live. All told, radically, beautifully, through the female gaze. I know that my boy will spend many years watching cars explode and capes in the breeze, but I wanted his first time in my very favourite of places to be about poetry and the humanity that can be shown on a screen; shown big and bright. As *that* final scene played out, I cried, wetting his blanket. It was a visceral, vital experience that I clung to in the months that followed, when we didn't venture further than the green space at the end of the road. When the films we watched were on a much smaller screen. I can't be certain, but I'm pretty sure the boy clung to it too.





CASE FILES

AARON SORKIN writes exclusively for **EMPIRE** on how his courtroom drama **THE TRIAL OF THE CHICAGO 7** became suddenly timely

I WAS ASKED to come over to Steven Spielberg's house on a Saturday morning. He asked me if I'd like to write a movie about the Chicago 7 and I said, "Absolutely! You bet! Count me in!" After I left his house I called my father to ask him who the Chicago 7 were. I had a lot of work to do and not much time to do it because the last thing Steven said to me before I left his house was, "It'd be great if we could release the film before the election." He was talking about the election of 2008.

I read a dozen books about the riot in 1968 outside the Democratic convention in Chicago and the crazy conspiracy trial that followed. There was the trial transcript — 21,000 pages — and, most critically, there was time spent with [political activist and one of the Chicago 7] Tom Hayden, who passed away four years ago.



Once I'd filled up on research, it was time to start writing, which means it was time to start procrastinating. The procrastination period is a crucial part of the process. You're climbing the walls, letting days, weeks and even months pass by without writing anything. It's because you don't have it yet. You have the research — you could write a report for class if you wanted to — but you don't have a movie in your head, you have a detailed Wikipedia page.

So I was failing Steven Spielberg but I was able to resist faking my own death. The film organised itself into three stories that I'd tell simultaneously. The courtroom drama; the evolution of the riot (how what was supposed to be a peaceful protest turned into a violent clash with the police and the National Guard); and the




more personal friction between Hayden and [fellow Chicago 7 protestor] Abbie Hoffman.

I delivered the first draft 18 months after my father told me who the Chicago 7 were. Twelve years and 22 drafts after that, we made the movie. When I started writing, it was just a good story to tell. Then Donald Trump ran for President. He began getting nostalgic about protestors at his rallies and the old days when "they'd drag that guy



Clockwise from top left: Director Aaron Sorkin and Sacha Baron Cohen (as activist Abbie Hoffman) on set; Sorkin and cast in the courtroom; The police deploy tear gas.

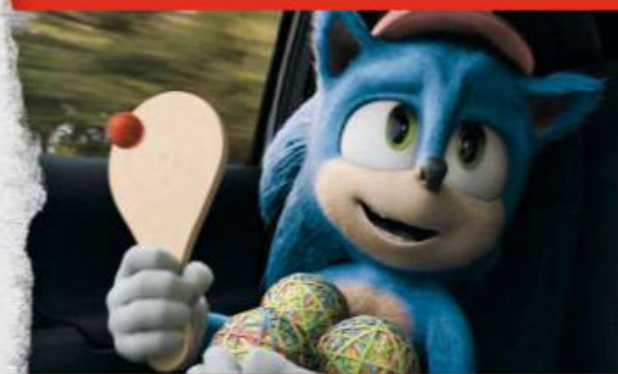
outta here on a stretcher" and "beat the crap outta him". Protest was demonised as un-American. As we were finishing post-production, George Floyd was killed. And Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. Protests broke out in cities across America. And then came clubs and the tear gas.

I've been asked if I changed the script at all to mirror events. I didn't. Events changed to mirror the script. 

Alamy

NEW MONEY

Unusual year, unusual box-office chart. We break down the ten highest-grossing films, a list that's Marvel-free and full of surprises



Top to bottom: *The Eight Hundred*; *Bad Boys For Life*; *Tenet*; *Sonic The Hedgehog*; *Demon Slayer — Infinity Train*.

1 \$469 million
THE EIGHT HUNDRED
2020's champion is a Chinese historical drama, about 452 soldiers trapped in a warehouse. Basically *Reservoir Dogs*, but epic.

2 \$428 million
BAD BOYS FOR LIFE
A barnstorming action movie in a year short on action movies, it wildly outperformed its two predecessors.

3 \$422 million
MY PEOPLE, MY HOMELAND
The follow-up to last year's *My People, My Country*, which made similar stacks of cash, this Chinese anthology proved patriotism pays.

4 \$354 million
TENET
Made less than half of *Inception*'s gross, but Christopher Nolan has said he's "thrilled" with the figures.

5 \$308 million
SONIC THE HEDGEHOG
The combo of Jim Carrey and a toothy blue *Erinaceidae* worked gangbusters. A follow-up is incoming.

6 \$250 million
DOLITTLE
No Infinity Gauntlet could stop the sound of Robert Downey Jr attempting a Welsh accent. Where's Thanos at?

7 \$240 million
LEGEND OF DEIFICATION
Roll over, MCU. The Fengshen Cinematic Universe, a Chinese animated venture, hit big with its second film.

8 \$237 million
DEMON SLAYER — INFINITY TRAIN
There was no stopping the Infinity Train: the Japanese anime has out-grossed *Titanic* and *Frozen* in its home country.

9 \$202 million
BIRDS OF PREY (AND THE FANTABULOUS EMANCIPATION OF ONE HARLEY QUINN)
The Margot Robbie-driven spin-off is the biggest theatrically released superhero movie of 2020. Sorry, *Bloodshot*.

10 \$147 million
THE SACRIFICE
Another Chinese war movie, this one about soldiers trying to repair a bridge as US bombs fall. Clearly not a bridge too far, going by its box office.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

BYE, BYE  2020



THE YEAR OF



WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

AVAXHOME-

the biggest Internet portal,
providing you various content:
brand new books, trending movies,
fresh magazines, hot games,
recent software, latest music releases.

Unlimited satisfaction one low price

Cheap constant access to piping hot media

Protect your downloadings from Big brother

Safer, than torrent-trackers

18 years of seamless operation and our users' satisfaction

All languages

Brand new content

One site



AVXLIVE:ICU

AvaxHome - Your End Place

We have everything for all of your needs. Just open <https://avxlive.icu>



THE PANEL

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:

ROB SAVAGE,
WRITER/DIRECTOR OF *HOST*

Most scared of: "I'm gonna keep it simple: Ghosts!"

NATALIE ERIKA JAMES,
WRITER/DIRECTOR OF *RELIC*

Most scared of: "Magpies. They swoop you in Australia. It's a whole thing."

REMI WEEKES,
WRITER/DIRECTOR OF *HIS HOUSE*

Most scared of: "Being introduced to groups of people I don't know."

ROSE GLASS,
WRITER/DIRECTOR OF *SAINT MAUD*

Most scared of: "Spontaneous interview questions, when you have to think of something off the cuff."

LEIGH WHANNELL, WRITER/DIRECTOR
OF *THE INVISIBLE MAN*

Most scared of: "Real life."

FEAR

2020 was, if nothing else, amazing for horror. **EMPIRE** gathers the directors of five of the year's scariest movies to discuss how they gave us comfort in cinema's darkest places

WORDS DAN JOLIN

AN INVISIBLE, GASLIGHTING stalker. A religiously unhinged nurse. A literally haunted refugee couple. An elderly woman whose dementia turns supernatural. And a demon-plagued Zoom call. If you required proof that horror is a rich, relevant and ever-evolving genre, you need look no further than the 2020 movies of Leigh Whannell, Rose Glass, Remi Weekes, Natalie Erika James and Rob Savage. It seems there's no end to the ways these inventive, daring filmmakers can find to give us the willies.

So, one evening in late November, *Empire* summoned them all together — from LA, Melbourne, London and, in one case, the middle of a film shoot — to share their appreciation for the dark side and reflect on a fantastic year for fright-crafting. Of course, we had to do it via Zoom. And, of course, Rob Savage, the creator of the ingenious, Zoom-set *Host*, suddenly vanished from the call part-way through. (Don't worry, he survived.) But, above all else, our 80-minute, genre-dissecting discussion showed us that this diverse group of horror makers truly do scare because they care.

2020 has been such a horrific year, on many levels, you might have thought it would turn people off horror movies. Yet the opposite has been true. Why do you think that is?

Rob Savage: I suppose there's something nice about being able to squeeze all the horror of your day into a nice, two-hour chunk and say, "I'm just gonna be scared in this moment and hopefully I'll be able to face the rest of the >

Left to right: Migrant crisis horror *His House*; Elisabeth Moss in *The Invisible Man*; Robyn Nevin as haunted matriarch Edna in *Relic*.

Middle, top to bottom: Lockdown horror *Host*; Morfydd Clark (as Maud) achieves lift-off in *Saint Maud*.



day.” With *Host*, the only question we were asking ourselves was: what’s the movie we’d want to watch right now? And that was a fun, scary rollercoaster ride, rather than something overly bleak. I don’t know about you guys...

Rose Glass: Yeah, just using my film as an example, on the surface it sounds like there’s a lot of bleak stuff in the subject matter, but the sort of stories I’ve always gravitated towards have been things which have taken dark ideas and told them at an almost operatic level. So it’s like Rob said: when you have this condensed burst of horror constructed in an entertaining way, it’s kind of like a release valve.

Leigh Whannell: Horror movies are my safe space. [Laughs] It’s when the horror movie finishes that life becomes scary.

Natalie Erika James: I agree. If I’ve had a long day, I will always put on a horror — or a comedy. You understand the rhythms of what you’re expecting with horror. You can kind of switch your mind off and enjoy it for what it is. There’s something really primal about it, in that way.

Whannell: When things are bad, when there’s a disturbance in the Force, if there’s a dark side of human nature that’s being exposed — whether it’s a global pandemic, or whether it’s the #MeToo movement — there’s something cathartic about watching horror films. It’s funny to be on this call, because Natalie and Rob, I’ve watched your movies during this quarantine. So thank you to you guys for helping to improve quarantine!

Savage: Yours was the last movie I saw at the cinema before we got locked down.

Whannell: [Laughs] Wouldn’t it be cool if this is the end of civilisation and when the aliens come down, in the rubble they’ll see a marquee with “*The Invisible Man*”? It would be a cool little footnote in history, like: “The last movie ever before we all went away.”

Remi Weekes: I still see *The Invisible Man* on posters around London.

Savage: Have you got a sense of how it’s played differently in cinemas versus at home, Leigh? Because it’s a super-claustrophobic movie.

Whannell: I don’t know. One thing I do know is people don’t have a problem just tweeting that they’re loving a movie while they’re watching the movie. It’s hilarious when @ZombieLover15 is like, “Man, your movie’s awesome! Can’t wait to see how it ends!”

Glass: Just wait 30 minutes!

Whannell: I do love watching horror movies and comedies in theatres, though, because of that communal, audible reaction. I can’t imagine what it’s like to direct a drama, then just stand at the back of the theatre looking at the backs of all these heads and wondering with complete and total terror what they’re thinking.

Savage: The really interesting thing about *Host* is we released it during lockdown, so everyone was watching it in their own homes, mostly on their laptops.

Whannell: Yeah, I mean, it seems custom-made for that.

Savage: At home, I think people find it really,



SAINT MAUD





really scary. I keep getting people tweeting, saying, “I’ve slept with the light on for three nights,” and, “I can’t go on my Zoom meetings.” I think because the idea of it was to reflect the situation we were living in in lockdown, that people feel it in a different way at home.

All your films use horror to tackle a timely issue or theme. How do you balance the desire to ‘send a message’ with making sure you deliver the requisite chills and shocks?

Weekes: That was a conversation on *His House* throughout pre-production and also post-production. I’m a fan of horror and I love that it goes straight for the emotions. So I didn’t really see a disconnect between saying something and also making an audience feel something. The art of being a storyteller is being able to take people on a journey and hopefully not let them go until the very end.

Savage: With *Host* we wanted to make a movie about how we were all feeling and the claustrophobia of lockdown, but we really pushed against it being an issue movie. For me, as a horror filmmaker, you’re always looking for a way to make the audience bring the horror back home with them.

Whannell: But I almost think you don’t have a choice in that matter, Rob. It doesn’t even matter that you tried to make a fun movie. It felt very much about this pandemic without being about it at all. I mean, the fact that we’re all communicating via Zoom and doing this right now, I feel like horror speaks to the moment even when you don’t want it to.

Savage: It can really bring an audience to a topic that wouldn’t normally engage with it. Like, there’s a movie I’m working on based on a short I made called *Dawn Of The Deaf*, which is a zombie movie with an entirely deaf cast of characters. That’s an amazing thing I think only horror can do. [At this point Savage drops out of the call]

Glass: We lost him...

Whannell: But it couldn’t have been more thematically in sync with his film, so... [Laughter]

Glass: Most horror films, if you take out the genre, you could probably say they’re really about something else, like domestic abuse, or Alzheimer’s, or whatever it is. I think horror

provides a really great framework to explore all these kinds of things.

James: I agree. It definitely goes hand-in-hand, like, what do you want to say with a film? What are you exploring? What’s the human truth you’re trying to get to? But using the horror as the vehicle to tell that story. They’re so enmeshed, and in a lot of ways, the subject matter informs the scares as well.

Whannell: I get very defensive about horror, because I think it’s a much-maligned genre. Oftentimes I’ll be talking to someone and I’ll get the impression that they think there’s only one type of horror film, when there’s just so many different branches of that tree. I love *The Lost Boys* as much as I love Natalie’s film. It does make me laugh when people online say, “Horror films are getting political!” And I’m thinking, “They’ve always been like that, from *Night Of The Living Dead* to *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*.” Horror films basically, to me, reflect anxieties in our real society. They literalise metaphorical monsters. So you get to have your cake and eat it.

James: I have a question for Remi: did you encounter any issues with trying to balance the social issues in *His House* with the horror elements? I definitely got a lot of notes — “We need a scare here,” kind of thing. And that’s fine as a note, I guess, but if the story doesn’t warrant a scare, you can feel the writer’s hand inserting it. So I’m curious whether you had any of those moments.

Weekes: Yeah, totally. Exactly the same. Like, “By page ten, you need to say it’s a haunted house.” I do think, though, that it’s not the producers’ or execs’ job to be creative. It’s our job to say, “How do I give them what they want, but also make sure I’m staying true to what I want to do?” I guess that’s what they pay us for: to turn crass notes into something worthwhile. [Laughs]

Glass: It’s not just notes at the beginning of the process. I am not on Twitter, but I’ve delved into the world of it since *Saint Maud* came out. It’s been quite interesting seeing the variation of the responses it gets.

Weekes: You go on Twitter to see what people say about your film? Oh my God. I’m terrified of that.

James: I had a guy say to me once, “I would rather get coronavirus than watch your film again.” >

Weekes: Ugh. No!



James: You have just gotta laugh at it. Like, what else can you do? Genre bros love to gate-keep, I guess!

Other than Leigh, you've all made your feature debut with a horror movie this year — and Leigh's 2015 directorial debut was a horror movie, too. What makes them ideal for a first-timer?

Whannell: They don't require any budget. The genre itself is the star of the film. And they also reach people. If someone in Iceland makes a really scary horror film with no name actors in it and no budget, I will be curious to see that movie. It's a genre that travels. So for first-time filmmakers, you can't do much better than that.

James: There's an inherent commercial viability to horror films. Certainly for me it was easier to get up a horror film, particularly as a female director of horror, because that was a thing people were actively looking for when I was pitching *Relic* around. So timing-wise, that worked out quite nicely.

Whannell: Can I just quickly say that when I directed a film a couple of years ago called *Upgrade* — which was more of a sci-fi film — Natalie was my assistant on that film.

Weekes: No way!

James: Yes! The government paid me to follow Leigh around for three months, which is kind of insane.

Whannell: In Australia, when you direct a feature film, the government says you have to take on an assistant who is an aspiring filmmaker. So I was presented with all these résumés and short films, and Natalie's film just stood out so much. I loved the fact that this was a female filmmaker trying to make genre stuff. During the whole shoot of *Upgrade* Natalie and I would talk about *Relic*. It's such a strange feeling to be on this call with you now, and seeing you here as a great filmmaker. I'm a big fan of yours. Can I be your assistant on your next film?

Glass: Remi, I don't know if you remember, but I was a runner on one of your short films...

James: No way!

Weekes: Were you? Oh my God! That's insane! I know we went to the same school, but I didn't know...

Glass: Yeah, it was a very long time ago and we barely crossed paths.

Whannell: This is where Rose is like, "Don't you remember? You yelled at me and said, 'Get out of the fucking shot!'" [Laughter]

Glass: You were very nice. It was a lovely experience.

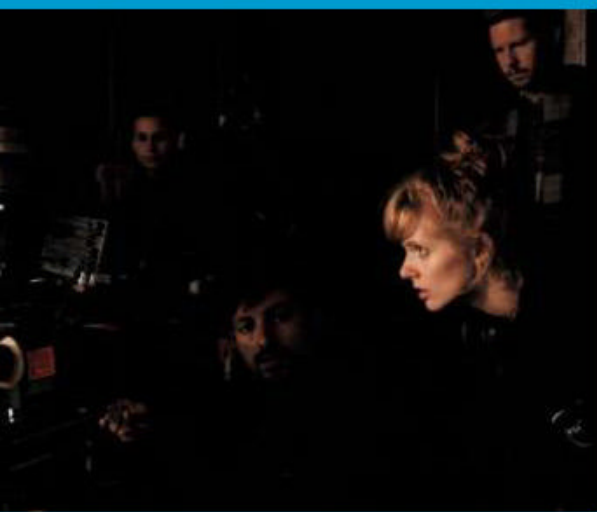
Where would you all like to see horror go next? What's the next stage of evolution in the genre?

Glass: Just more. [Laughter] People always want scaring and we'll just keep hopefully finding new, inventive ways to do it.

James: I agree with what Leigh was saying before about horror traditionally having a really bad reputation and being snubbed at awards and that kind of thing. So I'd just love to see it given its proper credit, I suppose, with people seeing that artistic integrity and the horror genre are not mutually exclusive.

Weekes: It's not that I want to see it go anywhere specific, but as long as there is such diversity that you hear stories that have such different takes on the genre, that is only a good thing, and an exciting thing, I think. Horror has always been really inventive in cinema history, so I hope we continue to make really cool stuff in our own visual ways.

Whannell: Yeah, I agree with what Remi's saying. One of the great things about horror is it's the only commercial genre where you can really think outside the box. You can be very artistic and strange and people just accept it. I hope that continues. Just look at the diversity of this group. We've got two people from Australia, we got three filmmakers from England, we got two



Left:
Director
Rose Glass
and crew on
the set of
Saint Maud.



Below:
Relic director
Natalie Erika
James.

female filmmakers. I love that. I don't know that the horror genre looked like that 20 years ago. It's been a very Hollywood-driven thing for a long time, and I love that none of us on this panel is from the US, and we're all making such idiosyncratic, personal films. I just hope that keeps metastasising into a full-on movement.

Horror keeps drawing filmmakers back again and again. Do any of you feel you could ever say you've made your last-ever horror movie?

Glass: To be honest, going into *Maud*, I didn't think it was a horror film, but it did turn into one. And equally with both the things I'm writing now, I don't think they're horror films, but the sort of themes and stuff I'm interested in will probably always have at least a foot in the macabre, more twisted bits of life. Whether or not that's exactly horror... I'll keep skirting the edge and pissing off Twitter.

Whannell: There's so much content these days, we live in a content blizzard, and I think it's getting harder and harder to be original. Every time I come up with an idea, I'm like, "Oh shit, someone already did that!" But it's also a great challenge to be like, "I'm really gonna have to go outside the box here to do something that people haven't seen before."

Weekes: Like Rose was saying, I'm interested in the fact that the world is just one big phenomenon. It's strange and sometimes uncomfortable and sometimes scary and sometimes bizarre or funny. So I'm interested in those feelings. But what eventual shape it'll take, who knows?

Savage: [*Having managed to reconnect*] Well, I am halfway through making my next horror movie!

Whannell: Yeah, you've actually been shooting it while this Zoom call is on! Guys, we don't know it, but we're actually the stars of Rob's next movie. [*Laughter*]

Savage: Actually, no joke: I'm currently driving from one location to another. We're doing a travel day today, so I'm in the car with my producer and the star, and we've been getting travelling shots as we're driving.

Whannell: He's actually made the whole film during this Zoom call. He started shooting it at the start of the call and he's cutting it now. It should be out next week!

Savage: That's why I dropped out for a little bit. I just had to go and finish it up!

Whannell: I have to say, I feel like the elder statesman of this group, wobbling in on my walker. It's so exciting: you guys are all at the start of your careers and you've made such great films. I'm just so excited to see what you all do next.

James: Yeah, we're all like, "What happens next, Leigh?"

Weekes: Yeah, Leigh. What do we do next? Tell us!

Whannell: It's just a lot of tears, a lot of whisky...

Savage: On it. 🍷

2020 VISION



COLOR OUT OF SPACE

Alex Godfrey on the movie apocalypse that went down just before the real one

I interviewed Richard Stanley at the end of March, when Covid-19 had fully consumed the Earth, all cinemas swallowed whole. Or temporarily closed, at least. For Stanley it was bittersweet — *Color Out Of Space*, about a potentially world-ending alien force, had finally been released, only to find itself the victim of a real-life apocalypse. "But part of me is quietly awed by the fact *Color* was playing on screens when this whole thing broke out," he told me. "It was probably the last movie a lot of people saw in their cinema before going into self-isolation." The end of the world as we knew it was nigh.

But what a movie to go out on. I loved how Stanley had turned H.P. Lovecraft's short story into an unrestrained hallucinogenic trip, with sickening sonic rumbles, alpaca explosions, and a score (by Colin Stetson) that sounded like Covid itself. On screen, Nic Cage's Nathan Gardner and his family hunkered down, slowly losing their minds, trying their best to shelter from the madness swirling around outside. Its unashamed nuttiness tickled me, but it was also a fractured reflection of what was happening all around us.

The timing of its release was the icing on the cake. *Color Out Of Space* is adapted from a century-old story, but it fit 2020 like a plague-proof glove. After decades away, Richard Stanley had returned, and he'd brought Armageddon with him. That's what I call a comeback.



BYE,
BYE  2020

BONG JOON-HO'S historic Best Picture win was a highpoint of the year. So we asked his pal **TILDA SWINTON** to interview him about his 2020

PORTRAIT HONG JANG HYUN

THE OUTSIDERS



Left: Director Bong Joon-ho on the set of *Parasite* with Park So-dam and Jung Hyeon-jun. **Below:** The destitute Kim clan in their kitchen. **Centre,** **below:** Cho Yeo-jeong as Yeon Kyo, the mother of the wealthy Park family.

What can you see from where you are right this moment?

I can see movie posters in my office. Henri-Georges Clouzot's *The Wages Of Fear*, posters of *Parasite*, *Snowpiercer*, and then Hitchcock's *Psycho*, etc... Humongous posters.

What has Zzuni [Bong's Norwich terrier] been up to recently?

Zzuni's been great. It's quite peaceful for both of us now. Since your home is near the shore, your strolls on the beach with five dogs are a regular sport, but I live in Seoul and it takes many hours of driving to get to the beach. Zzuni loves the beach, so I took Zzuni to the winter shore some time ago. We ran on the beach and Zzuni loved it.

What has been the most enjoyable thing about 2020 so far?

Though it was awesome to run on the beach with Zzuni, what I loved most was that I was able to set sail onto the sea of books and movies. I had so many books and Blu-rays that I had bought but never had a chance to open. It was great to finally be back to these.

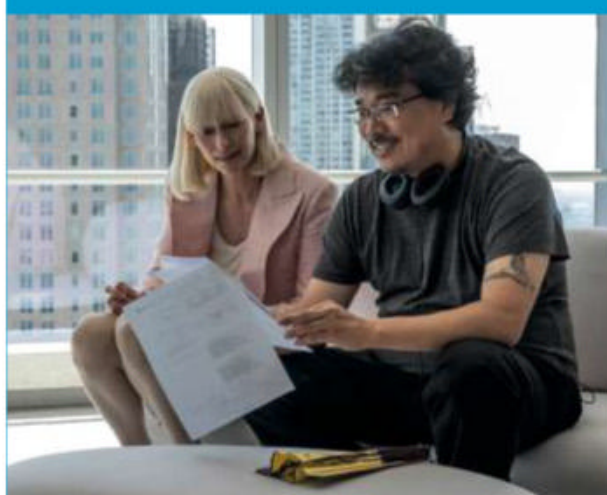
What have you been drawn towards reading and looking at?

Hell, drawn by the genius cartoonist Choi Gyu-seok, Tag Gallagher's *John Ford*, I also enjoyed Maria João Pires' piano performances. It was great to watch again Luchino Visconti's films in HD, such as *Rocco And His Brothers* and *White Nights*. Don Siegel's *The Killers*, Joseph Losey's *The Damned*, and the amazing films directed by the upcoming directors of South Korea. Like [Yoon Dan-bi's] *Moving On* or [Hong Eui-jeong's] *Voice Of Silence*.

What are your favourite memories of that night you broke/made the Oscars?

That it was finally over. That we were going home. The Oscars race was a strenuous journey. Spanning over six months, it actually took longer than *Parasite*'s production.

***Parasite* resonated with so many people all over the world. How does that make you feel about the world?**



Above: Bong with Tilda Swinton on the set of *Okja*. **Left:** Winning big at this year's Oscars.



Many people from all over the world resonated with the movie, and it was represented in numbers at the box office. It felt relieving, in a way. It's a sense that we are all connected by a thin, blue string. We are all living in the same universe, whether we like it or not.

What has been the most memorable response to *Parasite* from a viewer?

A very close friend of mine told me that the movie made him think of his father and made him cry.

A two-part question: what are you looking forward to making in the future and what are your eyes and heart longing to see?

To make it simple and basic. Being simple in a good way. I want to make such films. I would like to get closer to the essence of cinema through this simplicity.

A good one from my son, Xavier, whom you have known since he was 15, who loves you very much and who now works full-time making movies in the props department... Does the success of a director/writer limit their creativity the more successful they become?

I think it could not be considered a success if being successful puts limits on one's creativity. A true success will expand creative freedom and allow one to be bold with choices.

Lastly, and most importantly: when are we going to be together again?

Next year! Shall we email the details...?

And what are we going to eat to celebrate?
Ripe persimmons and whisky! 🍷

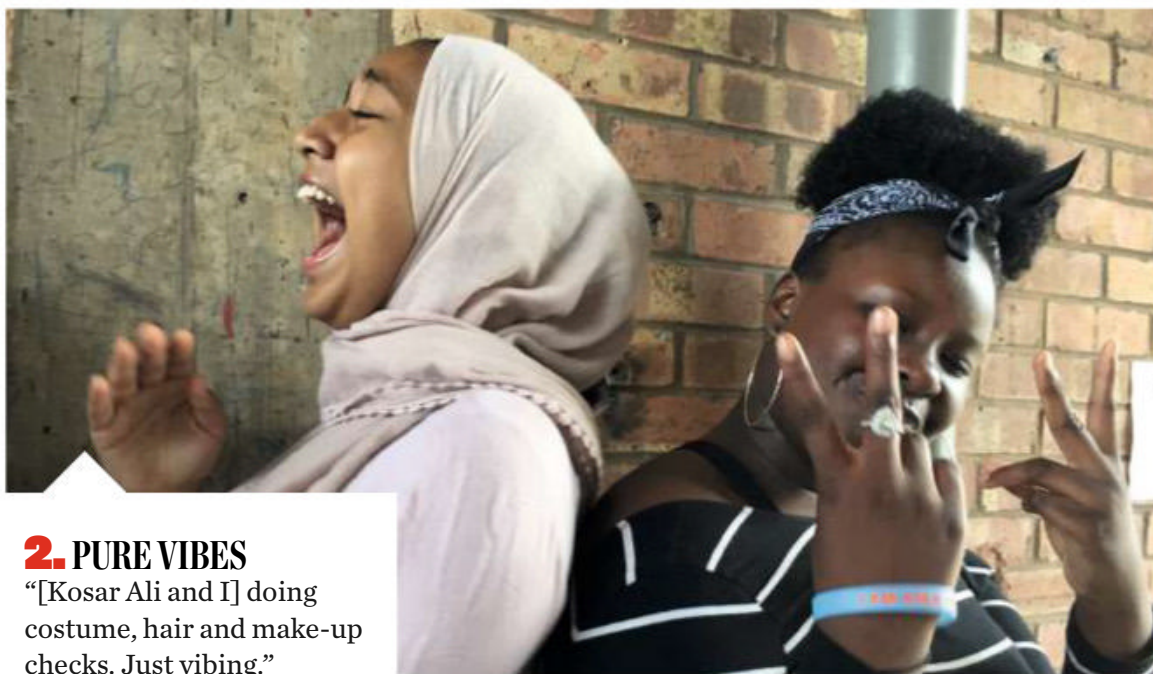
1. TITLE TREATMENT

"'Girl Untitled' was the production title. None of us liked the name *Rocks* at first — we thought people would think this was some film about Freddie Mercury. But now I can't think of a better one."



2. PURE VIBES

"[Kosar Ali and I] doing costume, hair and make-up checks. Just vibing."



CAMERA READY

ROCKS star Bukky Bakray shares personal pics taken on set

INTERVIEW ELLA KEMP

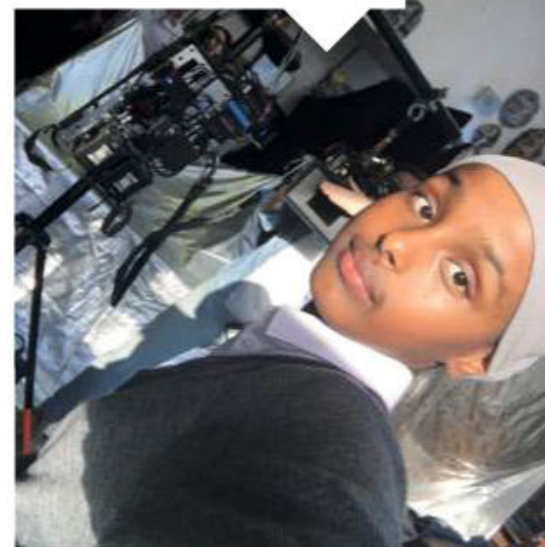
5. RITES OF PASSAGE

"This was in Hastings, the beach scene. The conversations I had with these ladies made me who I am today."



3. BEHIND THE CAMERA

"The boom is so heavy. I go to the gym, but I could not lift that for hours!"



4. THE YOUNG ONE

"With D'angelou [Osei Kissiedu] on the beach. He's just a bubble of energy."



6. FOOD FIGHT

"My favourite day. I forgot the camera was there. We were crying from laughing."



7. THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

"We'd just wrapped. My chaperone took that photo of all of us."



8. FAMILY PORTRAIT

"Everybody in this photograph is so beautiful. *Rocks* taught me that you're allowed to dream and take risks."



QUEEN & SLIM

Amon Warmann on how Melina Matsoukas' tragic romance foreshadowed a year of revolution

I was hyped to see *Queen & Slim* like almost nothing else in last year's awards season.

But watching it, there were two moments when my heart sank. The first pang of dread occurred during the film's inciting incident, which sees the titular couple kill a cop in self-defence and go on the run. The second came at the denouement, when Queen and Slim — so close to freedom — hear the sirens of cop cars that stop them in their tracks. It's a conclusion that we implicitly know to be inevitable, even predictable. That it lands as devastatingly as it does is a testament to how

Black lives are treated by police today, a notion that resonates in a year that has seen the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor jumpstart a worldwide reckoning on police brutality and racial injustice.

Beyond the superb performances from Daniel Kaluuya and Jodie Turner-Smith, impressive visuals and eye-popping costume design, *Queen & Slim* is a powerful meditation on legacy. Our titular characters — whose real names we don't learn until they're dead — are in a race against being immortalised. But they also take the time to live what life they have to the fullest, because a Black person's journey is just as important and meaningful as how it ends. That's a powerful message in 2020, and there is added power that comes from *Queen & Slim*'s relevance.

I long for a time when it isn't.



2020: THE TOP 20

The greatest films of a very strange year, as voted for by Team *Empire*



1
PARASITE



2
PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE



3
UNCUT GEMS



4
ROCKS



5
SAINT MAUD



6
THE INVISIBLE MAN



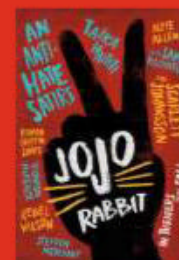
7
LOVERS ROCK



8
THE LIGHTHOUSE



9
MANK



10
JOJO RABBIT



11
MANGROVE



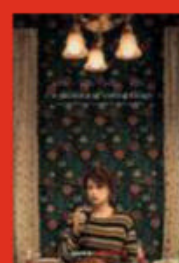
12
QUEEN & SLIM



13
1917



14
HAMILTON



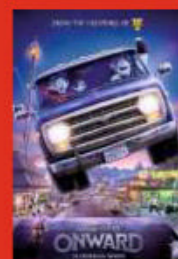
15
I'M THINKING OF ENDING THINGS



16
A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD



17
TENET



18
ONWARD



19
DA 5 BLOODS



20
HOST



NEW TV DRAMA **IT'S A SIN** IS RUSSELL T DAVIES AT
HIS MOST BLISTERINGLY PERSONAL. THE SMALL-SCREEN MASTERMIND
EXPLAINS WHY IT TOOK 30 YEARS TO GET IT OUT OF HIS HEAD

WORDS BOYD HILTON PORTRAITS STEVE SCHOFIELD NEON MATT DARTFORD

Russell T Davies,
photographed exclusively
for *Empire* in Soho,
London, on 15 October
2020, following current
social-distancing and
public health guidelines.





RUSSELL T DAVIES IS EXHAUSTED.

The story he's had on his mind for decades is finally arriving on television, in the form of visceral, angry, funny, transgressive five-part drama *It's A Sin*, and he's still coming to terms with it. When *Empire* meets Davies, 57, in a London hotel bar, he's still processing it. "I think I'm stunned that, having wanted to write this for about 30 years, we've actually made it," he explains. "And now I'm a little bit bereft."

Once he gets going, though, digging deep into the show's long difficult, glorious birth, he doesn't seem bereft at all. He's burning with excitement and pride, in fact, palpably thrilled that he's managed to tell the stories of his friends from the 1980s and the virus that cut a swathe through their lives. The series isn't so much broadly autobiographical as specifically based on what happened to the boys Davies knew back then. How AIDS happened to them.

In *It's A Sin*, directed by Peter Hoar, we meet 18-year-old Ritchie (Olly Alexander, from the band Years & Years), a would-be actor who arrives in London in 1981, and with fellow gay lads Roscoe (Omari Douglas) and Colin (Callum Scott Howells), move into a flat which they call the Pink Palace. The Pink Palace really existed. Davies' friends from Swansea really did end up living there, and then AIDS really did change everything.

For Davies, this story is a culmination of his work, from *Queer As Folk* — the sexy, groundbreaking '90s drama which made him famous overnight, mainly because he had young, pre-*Sons Of Anarchy* Charlie Hunnam getting a good rimming from pre-*Game Of Thrones* Aidan Gillen — to his interrogation of gay male shame in 2015's *Cucumber*. Together, these series form

Below: Russell T Davies on set with his *It's A Sin* cast.



Previous page: Camel coat: Mr P at mporter.com. Sweater: Canali at mporter.com. T-shirt and jeans: both Marks & Spencer, markspencer.com. Boots: Russell's own.



This page: Coat: Belstaff, belstaff.com. Sweater: Canali at importer.com. T-shirt and jeans: both Marks & Spencer, markspencer.com. Boots: Russell's own.

a decades-spanning exploration of the gay experience, with a little break in the middle when he took on *Doctor Who*, and turned it into the number one show on British television.

Of all those achievements, *It's A Sin* may well turn out to be the finest, certainly the most important, and for Davies, the most difficult to get commissioned and even tougher to write.

You've been talking about writing a drama about AIDS for years. Why has it taken so long to get it made?

It went round the houses. After we made *Cucumber* for Channel 4 in 2015 it went to them and although no-one would ever say this to my face, I think they thought they'd done their

gay-men story. And that's completely fine. But a lovely commissioner at Channel 4 called Lee Mason put it in his drawer and it sat there for two-and-a-half years until everyone changed jobs and new people came in and he opened that drawer and said, "I've got a drama!" And along came [new Channel 4 boss] Ian Katz, who read it and said, "Oh yes, let's do that...", and it was commissioned in a day. Strange, isn't it?

Do you know why it was turned down originally?

They don't tell you. I have to guess. But it is a tough sell. People die. It's a really sad story and also, you do kind of think it's already been told, but you really have to stare that down. Also,

there's no murder in this, no investigation. We're in a world of TV high concepts, and this is about the passage of time, about a decade in these people's lives. I was told, "This script will be better if you start in the hospital where people are dying and then say, 'Five years earlier'", but I refused to do that. I think it would have been commissioned immediately if I'd agreed to that framing device. But I couldn't do it. It's like asking me to do something cheap and rubbish and sensational. I needed to start it in 1981, when AIDS is just a little rumour on the horizon, a strange little mystery, like a fable. That's what it was like. I was there. And I think that's what held it up... But I wrote *Years And Years* instead, so it was fine. >



Did you have to go back and research what went on back in the '80s or is it all still in your head?

It was all there. A lot of this is based on the stories of people I knew. All the pivotal moments are absolutely true. The scenes that look most made up did actually happen. I did do an awful lot of reading to remind myself of what it was like. But in fact, a lot of what's been written is told in hindsight — about AIDS activism, for example. Let me tell you, if you were a young lad like me in the early '80s, AIDS didn't exist yet. It did exist for a small group of very forward-looking people in London and New York, but on my level, if you were sitting in a pub aged 21, it didn't exist. Which is why

I wrote a big scene in Episode 2 where Ritchie denies the existence of HIV, because I've never seen that dramatised. It sounded like an impossible thing. A "gay plague"? How could that happen? Ritchie talks about how he's heard AIDS only affects haemophiliacs, homosexuals and Haitians, and he's thinking, "It can't just affect people beginning with the letter H!" And that was me at the time, thinking, "This is just a rumour, it cannot be real." But it was all true.

How difficult was it to write this story?

It was one of the most difficult things I've had to write. There are repeated deaths and I had to dramatise each one in a different way. I've had

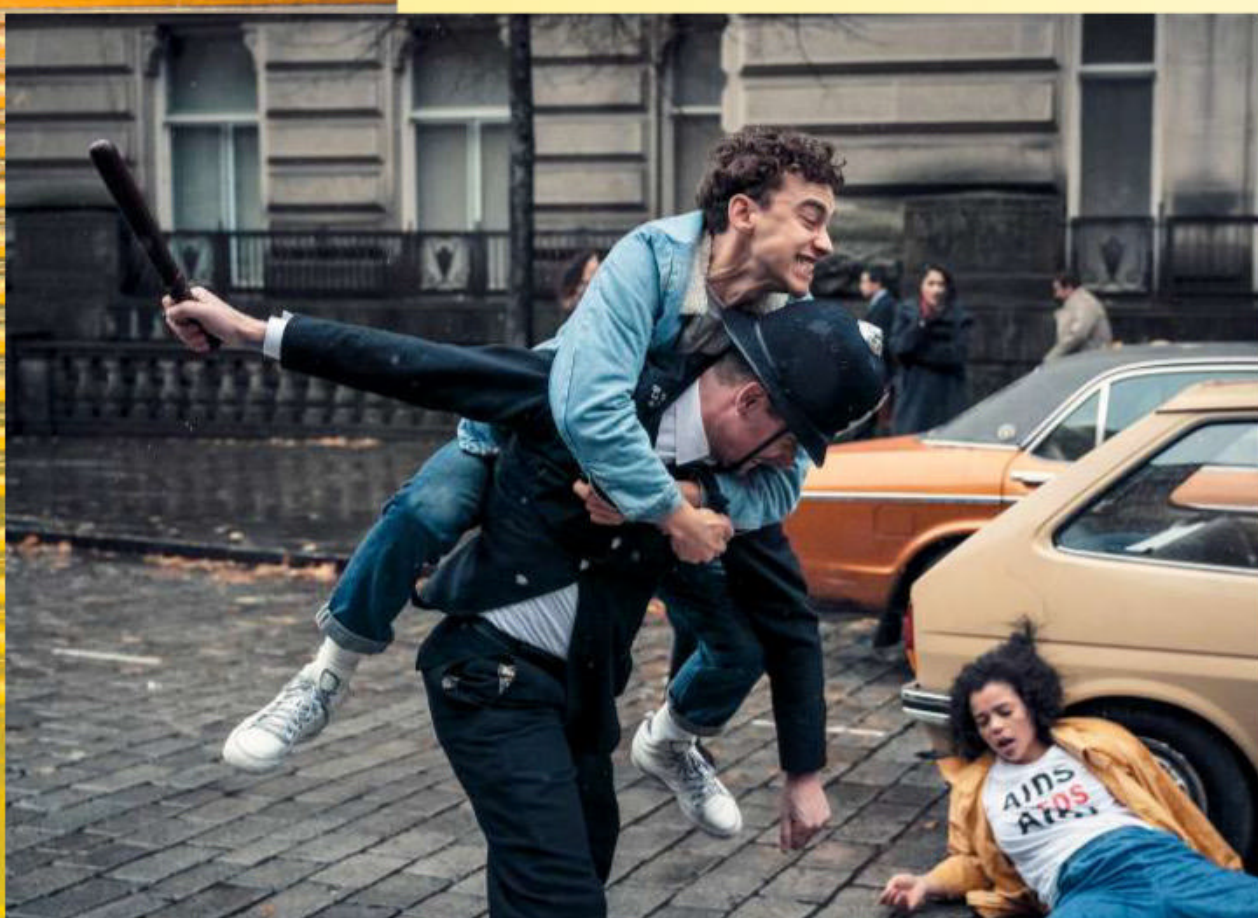
to use every trick in the book, every skill, every discipline and any talent I have to make it different, to tell these stories, and to not add tricks to it. I also pitched it as eight episodes and in the end, I've had to condense everything down to these five episodes. Channel 4 is only making four-parters now. But with all those deaths, I needed to give the story room to breathe, and they did give me another episode. But I had to beg for it!

Why did you change the title from the original 'Boys'?

The funny thing was, we always knew we'd have to change it when *The Boys* came along [on Amazon Prime], but Channel 4 liked the title



Top to bottom: *It's A Sin's* Omari Douglas, Lydia West, Olly Alexander, Callum Scott Howells and Nathaniel Curtis; Protests turn gnarly; Ritchie (Alexander) and Colin (Howells) on the town.



'Boys' and it wouldn't shift. For two years we had meetings and we'd sit there going, "Shall we call it 'Burn Bright'? Shall we call it 'Lost Boys'? 'The Generation Lost'?" But none of them sounded right, and for two years I could not think of a title. And then one day there came an email from [co-producers] HBO Max, saying, "We need a new title by Friday," and I literally turned around and went, "Oh, *It's A Sin!*" It was as if that title had been there all along wedged in my subconscious. And now I love the title. It was weird how it just clicked like that.

And it's a classic Pet Shop Boys song. Those '80s songs play a key part in the series. Do you specify which ones you want in the script?

Oh, yes — and it helps to have them in the script so we can budget for them in advance, although we did run out of money. Eighties music is expensive, and publishing rights are out of control. There are loads of songs we had to drop. Try getting a Queen song in there, for example. If you see a show with a Queen song on the soundtrack, you know it's made by millionaires. But we do still have a lot of brilliant '80s songs in there. We've got Kate Bush, and she has to give special permission. She sent a message saying she was delighted to be a part of one of my shows, which was incredible.

You also use *Hooked On Classics* as the soundtrack to an epic sex montage...

Yes, well, I was determined not just to use cool songs. We weren't cool. No-one is cool. We used to sit there in the pub listening to Jive Bunny. And I love how we've got the big sex montage to *Hooked On Classics*. I must have listened to that music ten million times, to get the timing right of all those scenes of fucking to it.

It feels quite celebratory when it comes to the sex scenes — was that a conscious thing?

Oh, yes. It's a story about spunk and sweat and blood. It's about a virus that is transmitted via fluids, so I was thinking right from the beginning you have to get visceral with it. In that first episode Ritchie has to wash his arse, and that's one of the things you have to learn when you're a daft 18-year-old kid. I have to say, I felt fairly radical writing that back in 2016, but now we've lived through brilliant Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* — with the tampons and the condoms and the blood clots — and I feel almost old-fashioned. I love going into that territory that drama doesn't usually talk about, because that's life. Twenty years ago in *Queer As Folk* I was doing rimming — deliberately, because I thought that was a really fascinating sexual experience that was never portrayed. So it was all the more important to address that stuff in this series, because it is about a virus on a biological, physical, bodily level.



You had an intimacy co-ordinator on set, but how does that affect the writing of those scenes?

Well, I still write them very specifically. So that montage to *Hooked On Classics* is about Ritchie very specifically moving through various levels of sex. It's not just a random blur of sex. It starts with him wanking, which goes to blow jobs, which goes to fucking actively, which goes to fucking passively, which goes to threesomes, which goes to... joy. There were some execs who thought there was too much sex, and I was saying, "This isn't just sex; it's Ritchie learning how to do it." Like we all do. So yes, it is a celebration. In a show in which sex is going to kill people I needed to find those moments

of saying and showing that sex is joyous. It was very important to do that.

It feels like this series shares a lot of DNA with *Queer As Folk*, more than anything else you've done since then.

Yes, well, at one point there was a move to call it 'Queer As Folk: 1980'. But we thought that title might have swallowed the drama a bit. But yes, you can imagine the boys in this show bumping into young Stuart and young Vince from *Queer As Folk*.

Has your writing changed from then to now? I think it's all very much of a piece. I think it is a body of work. I'm very delighted to have covered

the '90s in *Queer As Folk*, and *Cucumber* was the 2000s and 2010s, and I've gone back to the '80s for this, and the Jeremy Thorpe story we told in *A Very English Scandal* covered the '60s and '70s. I feel like I've covered those eras and found a different story in each one.

And *Years And Years* dealt with the near future...

Oh yes, I did the next 20 years as well. And *Doctor Who* goes up to the year three trillion!

When you were in charge of *Doctor Who*, was there anything you wanted to do but couldn't?

That's interesting... I think I did the *Doctor Who*



Top to bottom: 1999's *Queer As Folk*; Peter Caulfield, Vincent Franklin and Cyril Nri in *Cucumber* (2015); *Years And Years* (2019) painted a bleak picture of the UK's near future.

side of things ten years too early. I think I did that genre too early. Imagine doing it now with a streaming budget, like a *Stranger Things* or a *Good Omens* type of budget. *Doctor Who* was very cheap. Still is, really. What we did with it is still a miracle, and I had a glorious time working on that show. I worked myself to death, mind you. It was a mad time. It was successful beyond my wildest dreams, but I try not to look back on that time because success teaches us nothing.

Would you want a huge budget for this type of show, though?

I'd love it! I mean, there's a version of *It's A Sin* that is ten episodes long across many seasons. It would immerse you in 1981 with ten episodes, then you'd do ten episodes on 1982, etc. There's a big streaming version of this that I would have loved to have written. I look at those Ryan Murphy shows with proper envy, those shows where you can do whatever you want.

Do you feel we really are in a golden age of TV, particularly for writers and showrunners?

Yes, and it's glorious, like when you see someone like Michaela Coel flourishing in that role. We've never seen anything like *I May Destroy You* before. She re-wrote all the rules. Brilliantly. To get that at the same time as Phoebe Waller-Bridge — we are living in a golden age. And it makes me sit there and think, "I have to up my game now." You can't just write, "Man dies of AIDS." You've got to use your arsenal, and get all your weapons out and make it different and entertaining and astonishing — that's what the writers are doing at the moment.

Did that kind of challenge spur you on when you were writing *It's A Sin*?

I think so. I reached the point where I was ready to write it and had to write it. People ask, "Why tell this story now?" Well, I do feel that the memory of all this is fading and I feel the need to show what happened, how a lot of the families of the men who died could not accept that their sons died of AIDS. I could show you families who are still burning with anger from what happened to their sons. And they're still in denial about it. It's terribly sad. And it happened to friends of mine. That's why I've always wanted to write this. That's why the final episode has taken 25 to 30 years in my head to boil until it was ready. **And fuck it, then I go for it. When it came to writing that episode, I was thinking, "Finally, I'm here."** I had to wrestle that script into submission. For me this is a story that had to be told. It's important to me. I would have been on my death bed really disappointed with myself if I hadn't told this story. So thank God for Lee Mason keeping it in his drawer. 🙏

IT'S A SIN AIRS ON CHANNEL 4 IN JANUARY



GOING UNDERGROUND

IN 1989, KEVIN BACON,
THE GUYS BEHIND
SHORT CIRCUIT AND AN
UNKNOWN DIRECTOR HEADED
INTO THE CALIFORNIAN
DESERT AND CAME BACK
WITH AN UNEXPECTED
CULT HIT.

THREE DECADES ON,
WE EXCAVATE
TREMORS

WORDS DAN JOLIN

ILLUSTRATION CHRIS MALBON







ON THE CORNER OF 86TH AND BROADWAY, KEVIN BACON FELL TO HIS KNEES AND SCREAMED.

It was early 1989, and he was out walking with his pregnant wife Kyra Sedgwick, discussing a movie he'd just agreed to do. Or rather, *had* to do. Recently married, with a kid on the way and low on funds, the 30-year-old New Yorker hadn't had a hit since *Footloose* five years earlier. His feelings about what he'd just signed up for were mixed. It was not the kind of movie he ever imagined doing. "I took myself very seriously," he tells *Empire*. "I wanted Oscar-worthy work. But I was feeling a lot of pressure."

Suddenly, all that pressure forced him down to the sidewalk. He looked at Sedgwick and wailed. "I can't believe I'm doing a movie about *underground worms!*"

That movie was then titled 'Beneath Perfection': a quirky, low-budget creature feature that would be released in 1990 as *Tremors* and become a VHS-fuelled cult hit, spawning six small-screen sequels — with the latest (*Shrieker Island*) released only this year — and a TV series. Edgar Wright, Quentin Tarantino and James Gunn (whose *Slither* is a virtual *Tremors* tribute) are fans.

Tremors' popularity ultimately belied Bacon's anxieties. In the three decades since his Manhattan meltdown, there has been no stopping those earth-churning, people-gulping "underground worms" — or 'Graboids'. In

fact, their endurance has far exceeded the expectations of any of their creators, for whom the movie was tough to sell, challenging to make, and appeared, at first, to be a failure.



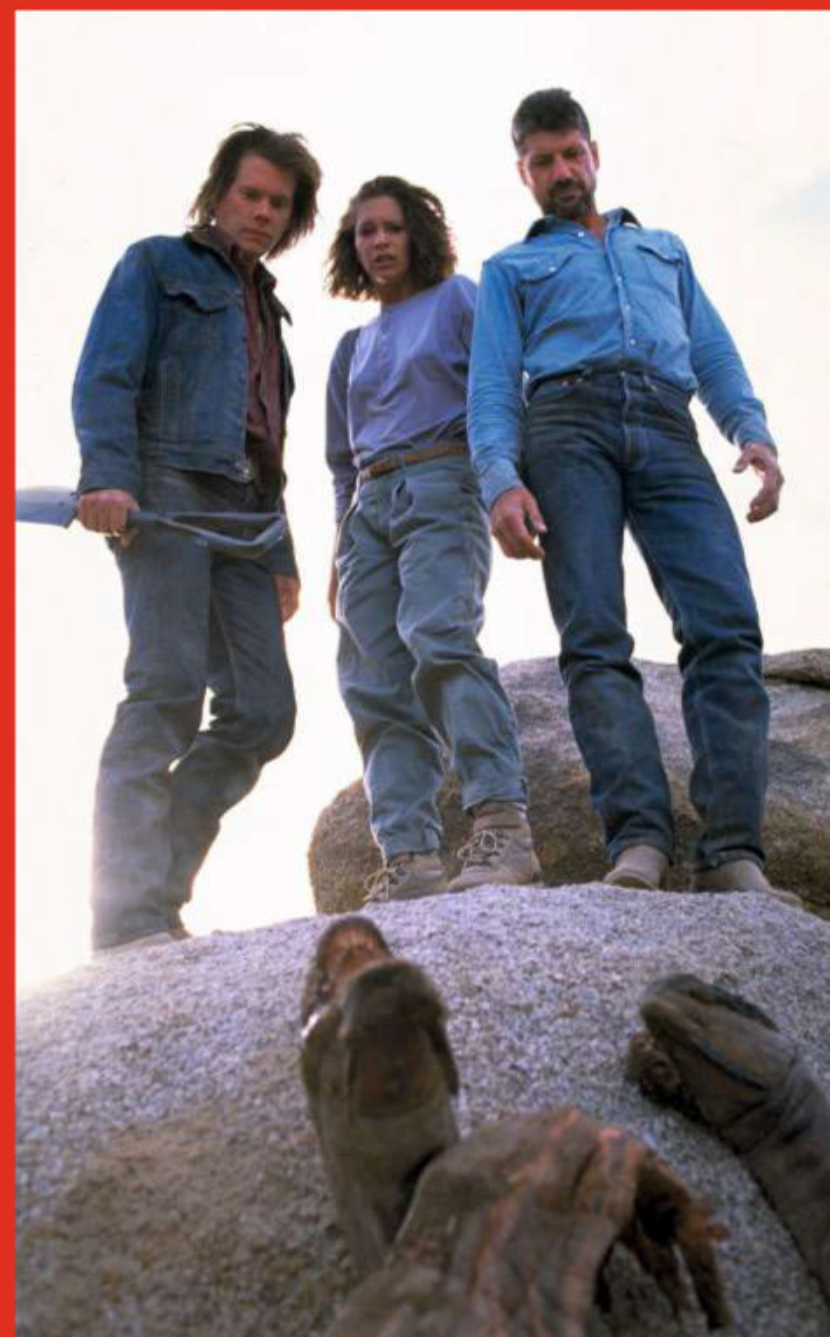
TREMORS' WHALE-SIZED, TENTACLE-tongued behemoths first rumbled into life in the Mojave Desert during the late '70s, where young filmmaker S.S. Wilson had taken a job editing footage of ballistics tests at the Naval Air Weapons Station. Wilson had grown up thrilling to Ray Harryhausen's stop-motion fantasies and the B-movie monsters of the '50s, such as the giant mutant ants of *Them!*, which had terrorised a similarly arid terrain.

On weekends he would hike around this vast base, whose ranges had been sealed off from the public since World War II. During one excursion, he was resting atop a massive boulder when a thought struck: "What if there's a creature under the sand and I can't get off this rock?" He added a title: 'Land Sharks'. And promptly did nothing with it for years.

By the late '80s Wilson was something of a big deal. With USC college buddies Brent Maddock (with whom he co-wrote) and Ron Underwood (who directed), he'd gone from making educational films, with such thrilling titles as *Dictionary: The Adventure Of Words*, *Library Report* and *Lice Are Not Nice*, to striking gold with 1986's *Short Circuit*, the tale of a malfunctioning robot who comes alive.

The last ended up too big for an unknown like Underwood to direct, so he dropped out, with John Badham taking the helm. It was

The beast unleashed! Meet the monstrous Graboid. **Below:** Val (Kevin Bacon), Rhonda (Finn Carter) and Earl (Fred Ward) ponder Perfection's problem.





Left: Megan (Bibi Besch) in a tight spot. **Above:** Val and Earl eye the enemy. **Right:** Walter (Victor Wong) gets Grabbed. **Below:** Gloriously gory. **Bottom:** Michael Dan Wagner as Old Fred — posing with a prosthetic mask for Fred's demise.



a \$100-million hit, but Wilson and Maddock weren't entirely satisfied with how it had turned out, frustrated at their lack of control over their material. They resolved to create something they could produce as well as write, and finally give Underwood his feature breakthrough. Their agent, Nancy Roberts, asked if they had any old ideas on file. Wilson suggested 'Land Sharks'. "Oh, that's pretty cool," Roberts said.

Set in a dead-end but friendly small Nevada town named Perfection, the script (retitled 'Beneath Perfection', thanks to *Saturday Night Live's* *Jaws*-riffing 'Land Shark' sketch) counterintuitively bathed its monster action in the broad desert sunlight. It also baked in a strong dose of character-driven humour, largely provided by unlikely-hero handymen Val and Earl; the kind of guys, Ron Underwood notes, "who normally would be eaten in the first scene". Wilson was adamant they avoid all the monster-movie clichés. So there's no 'scientist guy who knows everything', no "sheriff who takes charge", and no explanation for the Graboids' origin. "The people being attacked by these creatures would have no idea where they came from," he points out.

Only, nobody got it. "We went into these offices to pitch the story and people just gave us blank stares," Wilson says. "It was just too weird." Thankfully, Roberts brought Gale Anne Hurd into the fold: alumna of the Roger Corman school of schlock, and producer of *The Terminator* and *Aliens*, directed by her then-husband James Cameron. Hurd loved the concept and found the project a home at Universal, where



studio chairman Tom Pollock was happy to greenlight 'Beneath Perfection'. On one condition: they find a star.



THE MEETING WITH JOHN CUSACK didn't go well. Underwood had thought of him for the part of Val, but the *Say Anything...* star didn't bite. "He said, 'I just finished a movie with a first-time director and I don't want to do that again right now,'" Underwood recalls. (That director was Cameron Crowe, so go figure.)

The meeting with Kevin Bacon went better. For all his ambivalence, Bacon dug the role. "I didn't know if it was gonna work, but I thought Val was a really fun character," he says. "So often in films, people are special. But Val is not an extraordinary person in any kind of way. He's basically a kind of loser, who has this extraordinary thing happen to him."

To complete the Val-Earl double act, Underwood, Wilson and Maddock recruited

Fred Ward, veteran of *The Right Stuff* and *Remo: Unarmed And Dangerous*. It's now hard to imagine anyone else achieving the same loose, working-buddies-as-old-married-couple chemistry with Bacon — the actors "just hit it off," says Wilson.

Rounding out the Perfectionites were *Family Ties* sitcom staple Michael Gross as survivalist gun-nut Burt Gummer (Gross impressed Underwood in the audition — "he totally convinced me that Graboids were under the floor right there"); Country & Western star Reba McEntire as Burt's other half Heather ("We had a deactivated shotgun in the audition office," says Wilson. "She just grabbed it up and pumped it — Reba's a *real* country girl"); Finn Carter as seismologist/Val's love interest Rhonda; and a young Ariana Richards as Mindy, on her first monster-surviving rodeo before playing Lex in *Jurassic Park* three years later.

By spring 1989, the project was rolling, with a tight \$10 million budget, in the remote Californian desert location of Lone Pine. Underwood was greeted on his first day by a snowstorm. "At that point I thought, 'This is going to be quite an adventure,'" he says. "And I was not disappointed."

High temperatures then hit, but there were also set-lashing dust devils and windstorms, one of which created a perilous situation for nine-year-old Richards, up on the roof of Mindy's house, where the girl had climbed to escape the subterranean predators. "We were so worried for Ariana," says Underwood. "We had her cabled down, >



but these were 50-mile-an-hour winds.” Fortunately, there were no serious injuries. And the predators themselves were much easier to control.

The Graboids were conceived, built and performed by creature-effects company Amalgamated Dynamics Inc (ADI), set up by former Stan Winston employees Tom Woodruff Jr and Alec Gillis. Recommended by Hurd, who’d worked with them on *Aliens*, they constructed a life-size Graboid from fibreglass and latex, which Woodruff often operated from within, while the creature’s snake-like tentacles — intended to wrong-foot the audience (and characters) into thinking they were smaller monsters — were mechanical puppets, with a shorter, hand-operated version. ADI’s creations were complemented by quarter-scale miniature work by brothers Dennis and Robert Skotak, who had also worked on *Aliens*, as well as *The Abyss*.

“We don’t want to repeat what has been done in *Dune*,” Gillis insisted, hence the Graboids’ more slug-like appearance, complete with a pointed, armoured head and spikes, to help them “swim” through the earth “like killer whales”. Although, there had been an earlier iteration, which had given the Graboids a protective, hood-like shell. One which Hurd immediately nixed for looking too much like a foreskin.

“She reportedly just fell on the floor when she saw the first drawing,” laughs Wilson. “As four guys in a room — me, Brent, Tom and Alec — we did not see that coming. But when Gale said, ‘That is *not* going to happen,’ we realised. So the creatures lost their protective covering and got their beaks.”

Underwood insists that things went as smoothly as possible with the creature effects. However, “what made it difficult was defying physics to have a full-scale creature burst out of the ground quickly. We had an elevator in the ground, with Tom standing on it with the creature over him and dirt mats covering all that.” Often, this underground lift just wouldn’t work, with sand clogging its pistons. Mostly, it would

rise too slowly, taking hours to reset — hours that were only too precious, thanks to the shoot’s reliance upon daylight. “We got the tiny pieces we needed to make it work,” Underwood sighs.

Despite its initial worries about this untried director, the studio was actually so impressed with the dailies it threw the production another \$1 million to achieve a few set-pieces they had thought they’d need to cut. *Tremors* rumbled on.



UNIVERSAL WASN’T HAPPY WITH everything. Wilson and Maddock received a note insisting they explain the Graboids’ origin, so they concocted a sequence in which the Gummer couple discover a “crashed alien spaceship”, Wilson says. This vanished after the entire production staff protested, though the origin issue did return during post-production. With the studio in the midst of a buy-out by Matsushita Electric, studio head Pollock decided a new opening sequence should link the Graboids’ arrival to an earthquake, supposedly making the film more relevant to a Japanese audience.

“They hired a camera team to fly a helicopter along the San Andreas Fault, and Ron shot a sequence where there’s a dead rabbit on the highway, and a coyote grabs it then runs off. You see a Las Vegas sign shaking, and you hear the coyote yelping in the distance, I guess being eaten by a Graboid.” But test audiences *hated* it. “People were super-angry,” laughs Wilson. “They said, ‘How *dare* you kill a rabbit for your stupid movie! You guys are *monsters*!’” So that went by the wayside.”

The studio did get its way over two things. Firstly, it changed the ending to show Val and Rhonda kissing, after a test audience expressed disappointment that it concluded with Val and Earl finally escaping Perfection, leaving the romance hanging. “We loved the original ending,” says Underwood, “but sometimes you can’t fight everything.” Secondly, it insisted on a title change, because ‘Tremors’ “really tied into



Clockwise from top left: A sticky end; A Graboid’s tentacle, deliciously evil; Val in no mood for taking prisoners; The *Tremors* gang were keen not to invoke memories of *Dune*’s sandworms; Bacon on location with director Ron Underwood.



the earthquake thing,” Underwood says.

This aside, he, Wilson and Maddock managed to make the movie on their own terms — a rarity with studio films. Yet on release in January 1990, *Tremors* underperformed at the box office, missing Universal’s \$5 million opening-weekend target by \$1.3 million. The blame was laid on the ambivalent marketing campaign, which failed to sell the movie’s light-hearted-adventure tone alongside its scares. “That’s what the head of the studio thought,” Wilson says. “Because he called me on the Monday following release and said, ‘I’m calling to apologise. We blew it.’”

For Bacon, the box-office failure was personally crushing. “I thought it was a better movie than even I thought it was going to be when I took the job,” he says. “Some filmmakers say, ‘I was really proud of that and I don’t care if anybody saw it.’ That’s not my reality. Nobody in Hollywood wants to jump at working with someone who’s just had a bomb.”

But, he points out, “There was this crazy thing called VHS. And a chain called Blockbuster.” *Tremors*, says Bacon, was able to find “a new life”.

• • •

IT WASN’T SIMPLY THAT THE MOVIE itself ended up being a home-rental hit. Its success also meant that, after Universal set up a dedicated direct-to-video production department in 1992, those Graboids were primed to return, and keep returning, in a straight-to-video franchise which kicked

off in 1996 with *Tremors 2: Aftershocks*. Directed by Wilson (after Underwood hit big with his next movie, *City Slickers*, and moved on), it saw Earl and Burt fighting Graboids in Mexico.

There was a chance *Tremors 2* would be released theatrically, Wilson and Underwood tell *Empire*, but that was dependent, once more, on Bacon’s involvement. And he refused to return. “For many years Kevin felt that *Tremors* was a low point,” says Wilson, who speaks of “many painful years of watching Kevin in interviews, talking about the worst time in his life when he shot the stupid rubber-worm movie.”

Bacon recalls it differently. “I don’t really remember being resentful or embarrassed by *Tremors*,” he says. It was just that his personal troubles at the time intensified how stung he felt by the film’s box-office underperformance. Meanwhile, he says, *Tremors 2* was always straight-to-video. “I said, ‘Why would I wanna do movies that aren’t gonna be seen in the movie theatre?’ Back in those days, if a movie went straight to DVD or video, it was considered a black mark on your career.”

Without Bacon, the *Tremors* series pushed on, getting cheaper with each instalment and, in 2003, a TV series which was cancelled after one season.

Bacon has long-since made his peace with those troublesome ‘worms’. He actually loves the character of Val so much, he tried to bring him back through another *Tremors* TV show, which he developed with Blumhouse Productions

for Syfy between 2015 and 2018 (without its creators’ involvement; “another bitter experience” for Wilson).

“Val was the only character I’ve played where I really thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be fun to see where this guy ends up?’” says Bacon. “He was a mess, which was such a great idea. He’d been a Graboid hunter, and *People* magazine’s Sexiest Man Of The Year, but then there were no Graboids left to hunt.” Until, of course, they return to Perfection. “The pilot we made was fantastic. It really hit the tone, really took it into our era. The fact that Syfy chose not to pick it up is something I’ll never understand.”

It’s clear everyone involved is still incredibly fond of this weird, upbeat monster movie they made out in the desert 30 years ago. Along with its many fans. *Empire* asks Underwood why he thinks it’s still so popular. “It’s about what a community can do when they come together to fight off evil,” he says. “It had a positive outlook on human nature. We want to believe in the strength of our community and good people persevering.”

Wilson says that, for all the pain of losing his Land Sharks, he feels incredibly fortunate to have written something “that remains in the zeitgeist”. He still hears about it being referenced in studio office meetings, receiving kudos for the very thing that made it so hard to sell in the first place. “It’s nice to hear executives even now saying, ‘Well, you know... We really want that *Tremors* tone.’” Those Graboids, appropriately enough, have just never let go. **E**

SMASH AND GRABOID

S.S. WILSON TAKES US THROUGH THE BLOODY WEIRD LIFE CYCLE OF *TREMORS*’ BLOODY WEIRD BEASTIES.

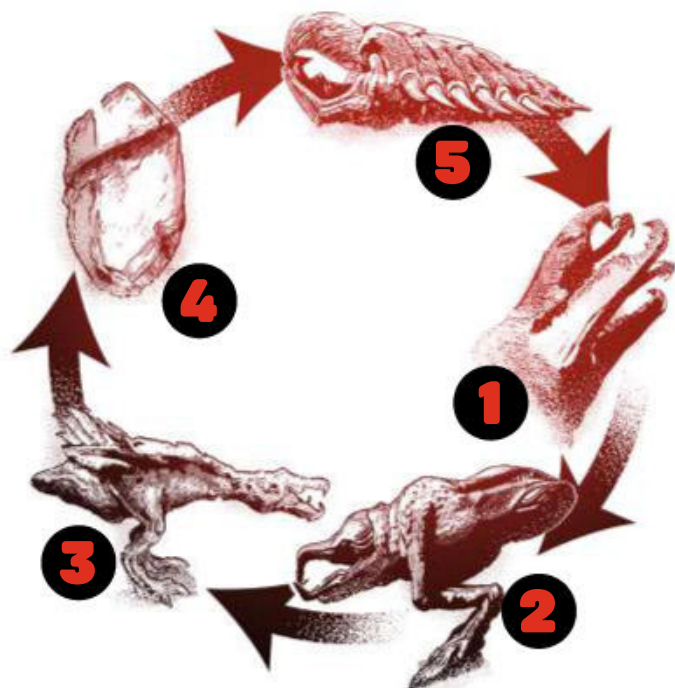


Illustration: Chris Malbon

1_ GRABOID

TREMORS (1990)

“Coming from my love of Ray Harryhausen, I wanted the thing to look completely bizarre and alien. So it’s a cigar shape, with spikes that move it through the ground. Its mouth is described in the script as opening like a bizarre flower, with ‘petals’.”

2_ SHRIEKER

TREMORS 2: AFTERSHOCKS (1996)

“Rule number one was: there will be no Queen Graboid. Instead, I thought, ‘What if it fragmented into something small?’ We wanted a way of having multiple Shriekers quickly. So we said, ‘The Graboids

metamorphose, like a butterfly.’ They just turn overnight into smaller creatures.”

3_ ASS BLASTER

TREMORS 3: BACK TO PERFECTION (2001)

“The Shriekers moult to become the Ass Blasters. We called Alec Gillis and Tom [Woodruff Jr] and said, ‘Guys, we gotta do another *Tremors*. What do we do?’ Alec says, ‘Have you ever heard of the Bombardier beetle? It mixes chemicals in its butt and shoots out this acidic blast.’ We loved it.”

4_ ASS BLASTER EGG

TREMORS 4: THE LEGEND BEGINS (2004)

“We closed the life cycle with the Ass Blasters. Then

Universal said, ‘We have to do *Tremors 4*.’ I said, ‘Do you care if we make a prequel?’ So I got to do my Western, into which we fit in the idea that an Ass Blaster has an egg in it, and we looped back to the beginning that way.”

5_ DIRT DRAGON

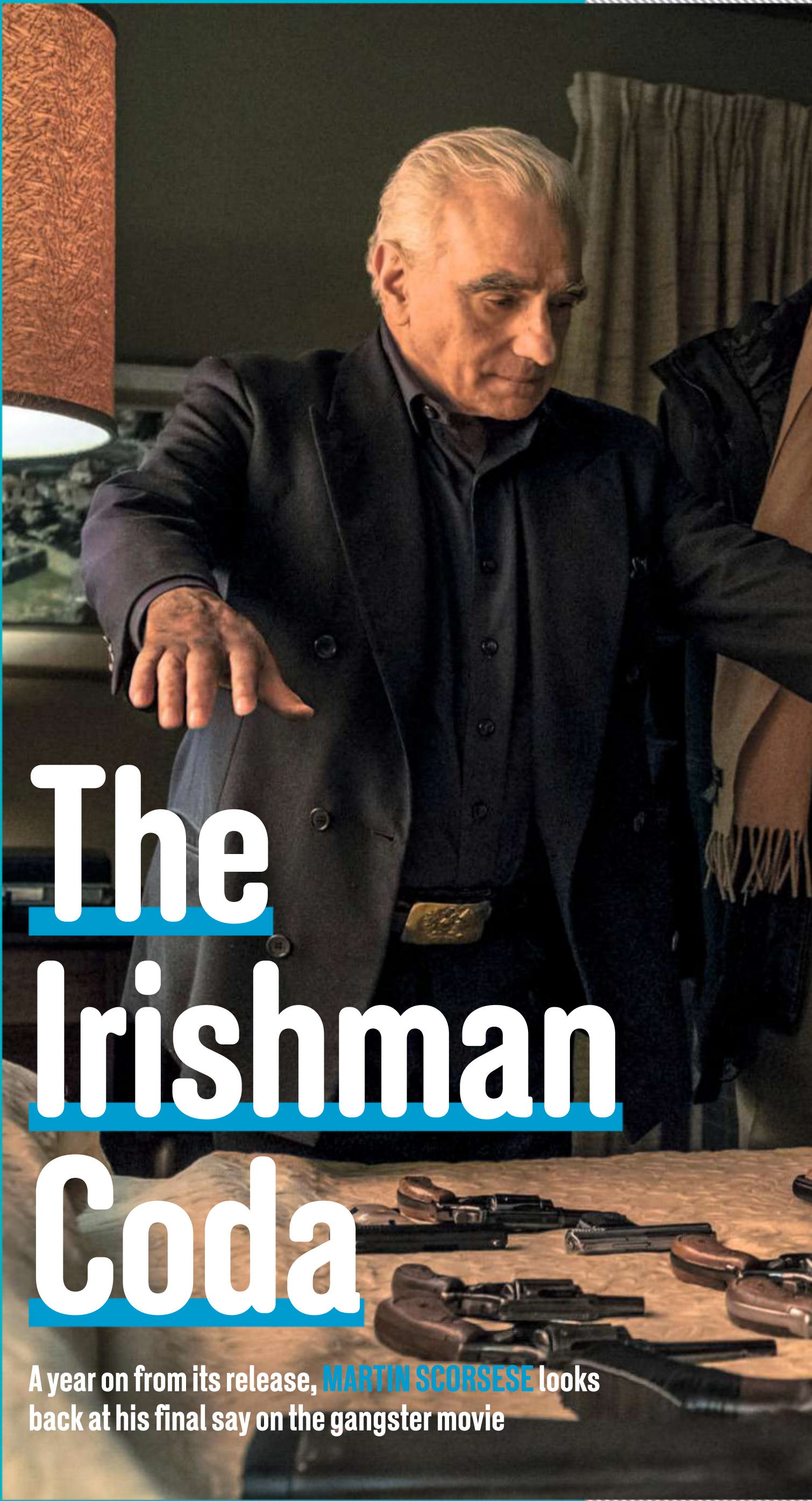
TREMORS 4: THE LEGEND BEGINS (2004)

“They really are just baby Graboids. But we thought it would be fun that they could launch themselves out of the ground, something we never wanted to do with the Graboid — they were the size of a whale, there had to be some rules. But we thought: ‘Maybe the babies can.’ They go really fast.”

Alamy, MPTV, Photofest

! SPOILER WARNING

INDISPENSABLE HOME ENTERTAINMENT [EDITED BY CHRIS HEWITT]



The Irishman Coda

A year on from its release, **MARTIN SCORSESE** looks back at his final say on the gangster movie



Guns and poses: Director Martin Scorsese talks Robert De Niro (as hitman Frank Sheeran) and James Harkins (as fellow mobster John The Redhead) through a scene in *The Irishman*.

“WELL, ALEX, I’M in New York,” says Martin Scorsese, as if it needed saying: through his office window, Manhattan towers around him. The city is in his bones, and throughout our video conversation, slices of his life, much of it from his youth, crop up — the sights, the sounds, the smells — and, of course, the wiseguys, whose behaviour he’s been studying for decades. In *The Irishman*, his 2019 adaptation of Charles Brandt’s book *I Heard You Paint Houses*, based on confessions from real-life labour union official Frank Sheeran (Robert De Niro) and his relationship with union leader Jimmy Hoffa (Al Pacino), he returned to the crime genre, but from a different vantage point. This time, he would explore its corrosive effect on a person’s soul. Taking a break from prepping his next film, the De Niro/DiCaprio FBI drama *Killers Of The Flower Moon*, he looks back on what has quickly become one of his defining works. A year since its release, we discover, he’s barely stopped thinking about it.

***The Irishman* had a theatrical run, it’s been on Netflix for a year — how do you feel about it being released as a physical entity, a Criterion release, on good old shiny discs?**

Well, I like that very much, because it is a movie. Along with other films in The Criterion Collection, it takes its place as an actual film. Apart from releases, length, theatre windows, streaming, it is still a film. It’s not mitigated by the climate of the time that it was released.

When you read the book did you immediately know that you would focus on time, age, regret, as themes? Was that clear straight away?

That was pretty clear. Because the action throughout the piece, I’m familiar with. I have staged and expressed it in other ways in other movies. This was different. Because of the way the book was written, and because of the interviews that Charles Brandt did with Frank to the end of his life... it’s interesting to me. Because that’s where we’re all headed. The sense of longing. And some regret. And understanding his defeat as a person, morally... he understands it at that point. Can he change? It’s too late. Well, it’s too late to express that change, although he tries. So he has to feel it in himself, he has to come to some sort of peace with himself. I’m not quite so sure he gets there, but he’s trying. I just thought it was interesting that at the end, some do reach that point, do think about their lives, and do think about meaning.

The way it’s filmed and edited is different from the likes of *GoodFellas*. Because of the milieu it’s dealing with, was it interesting to you to subvert what had been done before?

Well, pretty much I felt that it was a reaction against it. It was time to stop it. The core of *GoodFellas* was the provocation, the allure of crime, and irresponsible behaviour. Which I was then criticised for. Greatly, by a lot of people, >

and by wonderful directors. In America, a couple of Italian restaurants wouldn't allow myself and [co-screenwriter] Nick Pileggi to frequent them. I wanted to infuriate people that way because, what is that joy of irresponsibility? I have it in myself, in different ways. What is that joy, is it just immaturity? What is our fascination, or our embracing of the Johnny Boys of the world? The ones who won't play by the rules. You find that a lot in politics now, too. I can understand as a young person there's that impulse to be violent. But you could see in *GoodFellas*, too, how far that could go. Pesci's character is killed off. Henry winds up in the Witness Protection Program. Jimmy winds up in jail. There is that danger of the allure. In *GoodFellas*, by the end of it, I wanted people to be angry at themselves for enjoying it. I really did! We have to understand that in ourselves, we may be capable of such a thing. In different ways. There are people in finance, in politics, in certain stratas of society who are in the same kind of delirious, hallucinatory life. And so what is that? The moth to a flame in our human nature. I wanted to get people thinking about that. But the danger there is that you'll also enjoy it.

Right.

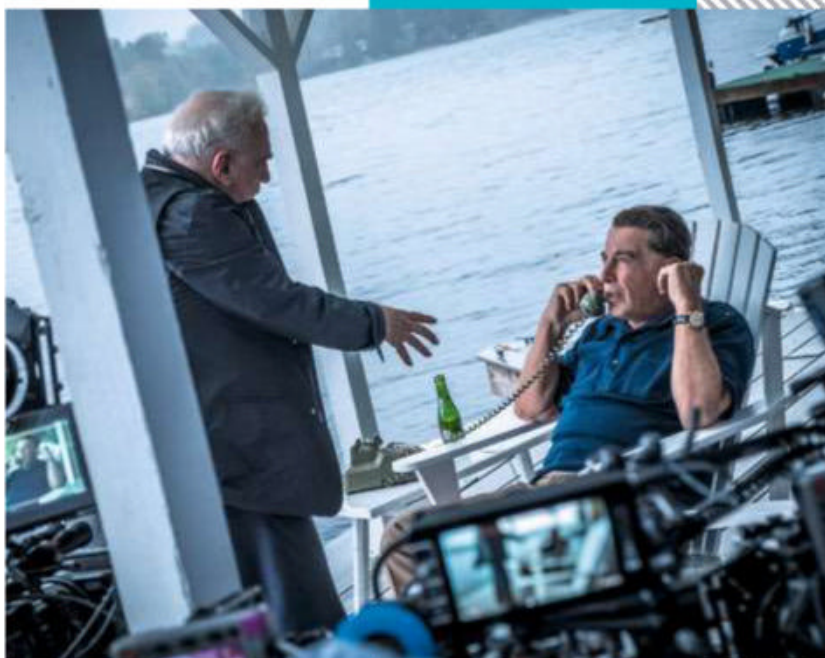
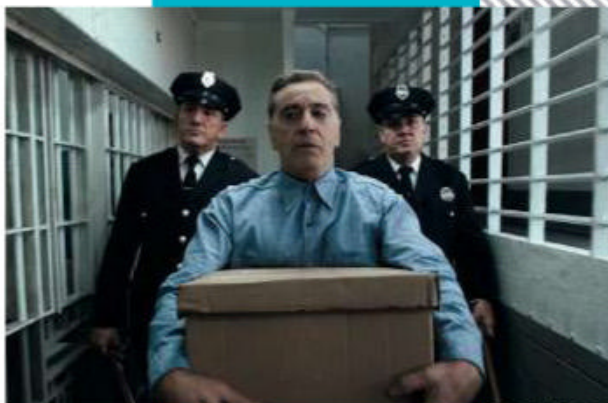
It's the same thing with *The Wolf Of Wall Street* when he takes the Quaaludes and he has to crawl to the car. We're laughing, but why are we laughing? Are you trying to get it both ways as a filmmaker? I don't know. I know that that's funny. I've been in situations like that. [Laughs] It's not nice. But a lot of things that are not nice are funny. And let's explore it. By the time you get to *Irishman*, there's no more time for that. And he's gotten past that. *The Irishman* is dealing with the sense of who we are, the violence in us. I said, "I know what to do here — it's gotta be, will he and can he review his life? And the price he has to pay." The priest forgives him, God forgives him, he can't forgive himself. So that's where we were going, right from the beginning. I said to [screenwriter] Steve Zaillian, "It's about mortality."

Let's discuss some sartorial choices. Firstly, the pyjamas scene with Frank and Jimmy. There's a Bert and Ernie vibe to it.

Yes. You know, these are men on the road. He's a bodyguard confidant. You think he's gonna sleep in another suite down the hall? He's gotta be with Jimmy, he's gotta be next to him. There's a gun on the night table. Very important. And they hang around in their pyjamas. It reminds me a little of a scene I loved in Don Siegel's *The Killers*, with Lee Marvin and Clu Gulager talking in a hotel room and they're washing their

Top to bottom:

Anna Paquin as Frank's daughter Peggy; Jimmy Hoffa (Al Pacino) leaves prison; Joe Pesci (with De Niro) as crime boss Russell Bufalino; Scorsese and Pacino on set.



drip-dry shirts [cackles]. The drip-dry shirt in the '60s was a big deal. You just wash it and you didn't have to press it. It's just practical, guys, come on! It's very intimate because Jimmy's got to be there, and they trust each other that way. It's kinda nice.

Then you have Tony Pro [Stephen Graham] in his little shorts...

That's outrageous. Actually, it's Florida. You do that. We were kids from the Lower East Side, there were no pools. To go to a pool was a big deal, and that was a place called Ravenhall, a public pool in Coney Island. That was where the neighbourhood people went, but also the wiseguys. Wiseguys would never go in the pool, they'd be playing cards in these little cabanas. And they'd be wearing cabana sets just like what Tony's wearing. A jacket that had a collar with lapels, terrycloth, nice design, Hawaiian usually. That's what they wore. So Tony, in Florida, that's what he's wearing, what's the problem? *Highly* disrespectful to come to a meeting like that, dressed that way.

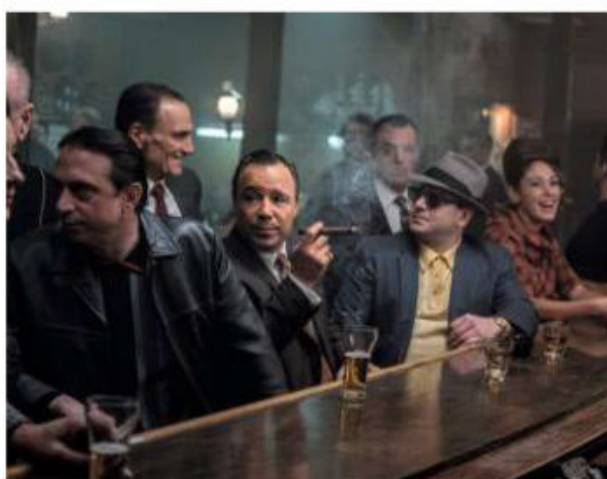


Top to bottom:
Scorsese and De Niro on location;
Hoffa and some cool headgear;
Tony Pro (Stephen Graham) at a bar in The Bronx.

That scene is almost like something from *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Really?

In a good way.
I love *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

I mean when they're discussing how late is late. Ten minutes, 15 minutes, 12-and-a-half?
Yeah. Because Bob's character's trying to make a joke of it. Because this is all gonna go wrong. You know what it took to get that meeting? And it's gonna go wrong because they're arguing over ten as opposed to 15? Somebody's gonna get shot. Somebody's gonna die in that moment [laughs]. They've gotta make a joke about those extra few minutes. But I take it as a compliment in terms of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. And it is funny. If there's a glimmer of humour, Frank is gonna jump in there and make it funnier. [Laughs] The poor guy's sitting there, Tony Jack, saying, "Yeah, it was bumper to bumper." Bumpertobumper is one word. "Yeah, it was bumpertobumper, whaddya want from me." [Laughs] We were laughing!

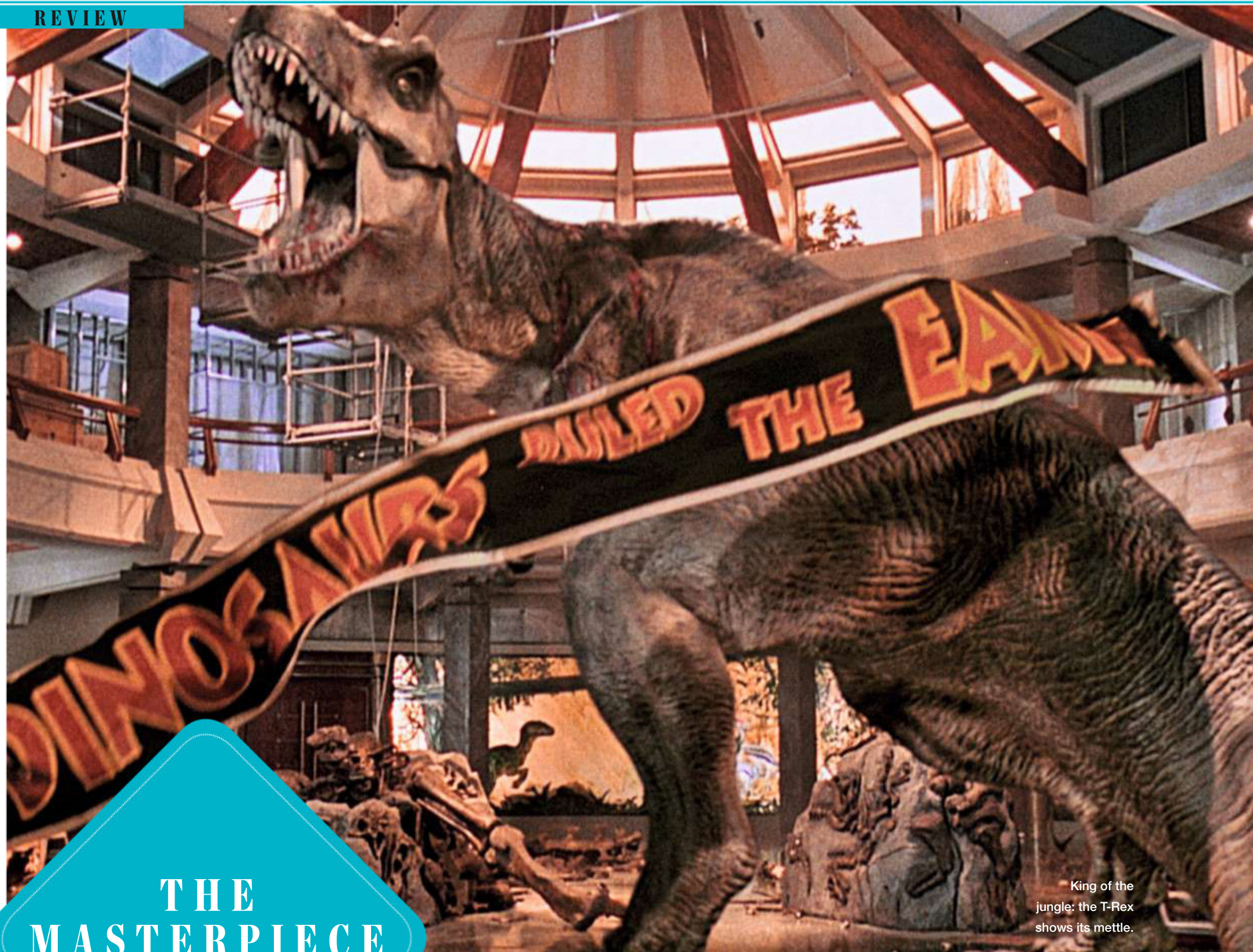


The build-up to Hoffa's murder is so loaded with foresight and anticipation, but when it happens it's so underplayed and grounded. There's no music, the drama comes purely from the way that De Niro carries himself...
That's right. De Niro goes into this house, and there's a guy that we've never seen before, Sally Bugs [Louis Cancelmi], and he says, "Hey, Frank," and he says, "Hi, Sally." Frank doesn't know that Sally's gonna be there, he wasn't told. We never met this guy. Yet they know each other. Hmm. "Is Sally there to kill me?" Interesting. Then De Niro just cases the house. He walks through to the kitchen where there are two other guys sitting at a table, whom he doesn't know. He then goes behind the wall, opens the door to the back. He comes back, he goes to the window. The way he moves through the house is when I realised that that was basically the essence of the movie. Every step he takes there could be somebody with a gun to shoot him. When he kills Jimmy he looks for a moment to see if there's anybody there to kill him. I wanted you to stay in that experience. And also the method of the whole operation. The methodical nature of what he has to do. Every moment, every second, every breath he takes, is leading to catastrophe. And he's gotta do it. He has to do it. And so we do, with him. And the simpler, I thought, the better. It's about the deliberate nature of his own suicide, morally.

How do you feel about the film now that it's been out a year, absorbing reactions to it?

I like that people appreciated it. I was very touched by that. This Covid, this pandemic, has stopped a creative process. I turned in on myself. Particularly the first couple of months, when we were locked in our houses, it eliminated a lot of distraction. I have to find a way to get back to a singular creative impulse for my new film the way I had for *Irishman*. Cut away all the award ceremonies, all that stuff, and get back to being in a room alone with a project and wondering if I can do something again. With *Irishman*, we achieved what I wanted to do. Whether it's great or good or not, I don't know. I know I could watch it. What I mean is I have to go back and find that spark. I don't know if I can. But the pandemic has made it almost obligatory to go and find it. Because everything else is gone, normal life is not there anymore. So what do you have? You have people you love, family, and you hope, a creative spark, and maybe that can be rekindled for a new film. But I keep going back to *Irishman*. Thinking on *Irishman*. I use *Irishman* as... I use that experience as the lesson. **ALEX GODFREY**

**THE IRISHMAN IS OUT NOW ON CRITERION COLLECTION
BLU-RAY AND DVD**



King of the jungle: the T-Rex shows its mettle.

THE MASTERPIECE

We reassess the greatest films of all time, one film at a time

Jurassic Park

HOW DID IT TAKE SO LONG for Hollywood to notice that every kid loves dinosaurs, and that every adult remembers loving dinosaurs, and capitalise on it? A few films had flirted with pre-history — *King Kong*, *The Valley Of Gwangi*, *One Million Years B.C.*, animations like *The Land Before Time* — but none had entirely hit the spot. At the turn of the 1990s we were still waiting for

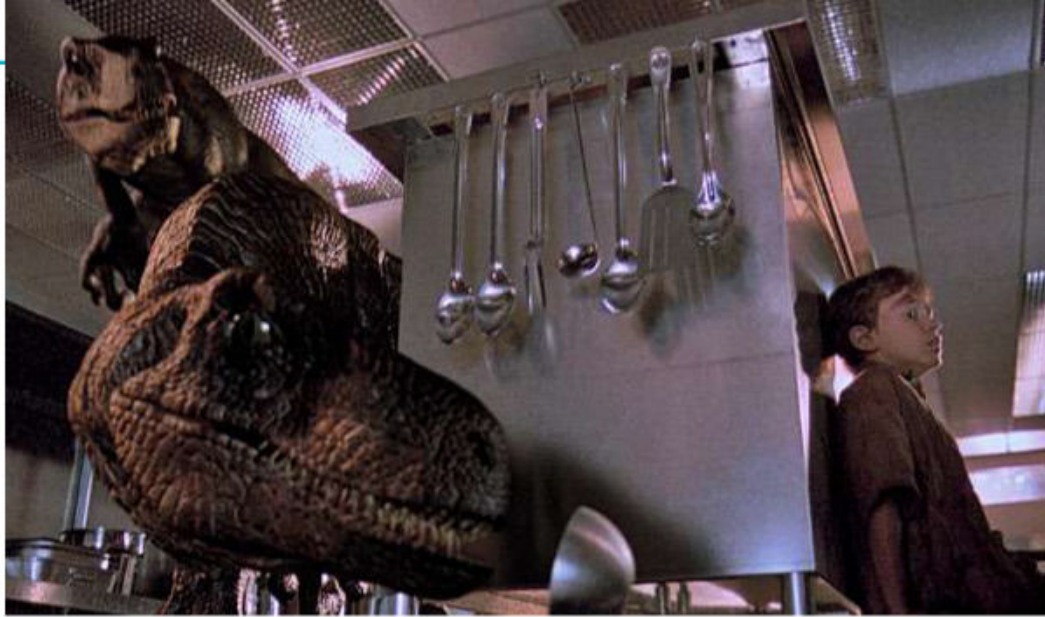
the dinosaur mayhem we instinctively knew could be ours. Surely one day someone would compensate the generations disappointed by the false promises of the title *One Of Our Dinosaurs Is Missing* (it's just a bunch of bones that gets stolen! And it sounded so exciting). Then came Michael Crichton's bestselling book *Jurassic Park*, and Steven Spielberg's eye for a story, and the realisation that special and visual effects had reached the point where you'll believe a triceratops can attract flies. Finally, Hollywood delivered on dinosaurs, and the whole world went to see them.

The basic elements to make it work were in the novel, garnished in just enough scienciness to feel plausible. Science was beginning to map and manipulate DNA, and who wouldn't wield such power to bring back every kid's favourite monsters? Sadly, those fun-sponge scientists would just use it to clone sheep — but there was hope that more interesting possibilities could follow. Still, big changes would be needed before the film came to screens. It's still the tale of a billionaire, John Hammond (Richard Attenborough), who harvests DNA from ancient mosquitos, preserved in amber, to resurrect dinosaurs through cloning technology. He still invites paleontologist Alan Grant (Sam Neill)

and paleobotanist Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern — thankfully aged up from the book's graduate student) to inspect the park, along with chaos theorist Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum) and Hammond's own grandchildren.

But Spielberg and his screenwriter David Koepp significantly streamlined the account of how everything goes wrong, jettisoning a whole subplot about dinosaurs escaping the island to Costa Rica and front-loading Grant's realisation that the dinosaurs are breeding. Crucially, the director made Hammond more sympathetic, more a dreamer than the book's swaggering bully, and cast the avuncular Attenborough. Such tweaks allowed Hammond to survive instead of being eaten by a flock of tiny *Procompsognathus*. That may be less accurate a portrayal of your average billionaire, but it feels in keeping with its director. There is nothing wrong with wanting to create magic in a cynical world, Spielberg seems to be saying; perhaps it's even commendable.

What's wonderful about the line-up of characters here is that they're all smart, funny and never bland, something that's true of Wayne Knight's ratfink Nedry or Samuel L. Jackson's tiny role as well as our central heroes. Sure, they each have their blindspots and failings in the face



of an overwhelming disaster — but you want to watch them just as much as the reptiles. Even the loathsome lawyer, Gennaro (Martin Ferrero), is charmed by the dinosaurs, for all he expresses his awe in dollar terms. Everyone seems roughly as sympathetic and as flawed as everyone else, so you can't be sure initially who's going to bite it — or rather, get bitten — and who will make it out in one piece. Looking back, there's some sort of narrative logic at work. Nedry dies because he doesn't take the threat seriously; hunter and wildlife expert Robert Muldoon (Bob Peck) because he lived by the sword and had to die by it. Malcolm is injured because he doesn't know enough about what he's facing, and doesn't take expert advice. That rarely ends well in fiction or reality.

It's the humans' story, which is what makes it work as an adventure like no other. They're caught in suddenly hostile territory with only the flimsiest hope of getting home, and must work together to get to safety and, crucially, keep the party's two innocents, Hammond's grandchildren, safe and protected. The kids' presence isn't just Spielberg catering to the kids in the audience: they're there to reassure us all that *someone* is going to survive this ordeal. The alternative is unthinkable, apocalyptic.

Without that narrative assurance that someone, *surely*, has to survive, we'd have been worried, because our human heroes face terrifying odds from what look awfully like real dinosaurs, resurrected after a 65 million-year nap. At the time, the visual effects elements involved were much talked about, and it's true that ILM's efforts were done so expertly and used so judiciously that they still hold up several generations of CGI later. But those 14-odd minutes are dwarfed by Stan Winston's extraordinary physical effects, with Tyrannosaurus eyes that could actually dilate and sick

Triceratops that laboured to breathe. It's a stunning example of what is possible when special and visual effects go hand-in-hand, each compensating for the limitations of the other. Spielberg had learned how to work around the shortcomings of a monster before, in *Jaws*. Here, given so much more to work with, he used the models and magic exactly enough to make the dinosaurs a hulking, physical presence without completely stealing the film from his cast.

And of course, they're not just wild animals; they are wild animals that we created. That gives *Jurassic Park* an important dimension for a disaster movie: the Frankensteinian horror of a creator brought down by his own creation. The things we make — stories, governments, children: pick your metaphor — do not necessarily obey our will. To create is to risk destruction, yet without creation, what's the point in living?

Hammond's survival tells us that his dream of creating wonders was admirable, and he sinned only in trying to impose order on his work. Nature, uh, finds a way to undo the best-laid plans of theme park moguls. Humanity tends to overestimate how much control we have — as the finale makes crystal clear. In the end, it's not their undoubted pluck or grit or human ingenuity that saves the quasi-nuclear family of Grant, Sattler and the kids. It's the T-Rex, king of all predators, turning on his pretenders and tearing them apart. How could the film end except with the greatest monster of all tearing down the competition and roaring his triumph to the skies? The best humanity can hope for is to fly off into the sunset, surviving to run away another day. Disastrous hubris is part of our DNA. **HELEN O'HARA**

JURASSIC PARK IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL

Top: Tim Murphy (Joseph Mazzello) finds the Velociraptor isn't his favourite dino. **Left:** Robert Muldoon (Bob Peck), John Hammond (Richard Attenborough), Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum), Alan Grant (Sam Neill) and Ellie Sattler (Laura Dern) hit the park.

JURASSIC PARK IN NUMBERS



11/6/93

The day it was released in the US

\$47 MILLION

ITS OPENING WEEKEND IN THE US,
THEN A RECORD

\$912 MILLION

THE AMOUNT IT MADE IN ITS INITIAL
RUN AT THE BOX OFFICE, MAKING IT
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5
The number
of times John
Hammond says,
"spared no
expense"

8 THE NUMBER OF
DINOSAUR SPECIES THAT
APPEAR IN THE FILM
(Brachiosaurus,
Dilophosaurus, Gallimimus,
Parasaurolophus,
Tyrannosaurus rex,
Triceratops, Velociraptor,
and Alamosaurus, which can
be seen as a skeleton)



3 NUMBER OF OSCARS WON
(BEST VISUAL EFFECTS,
BEST SOUND, BEST SOUND
EFFECTS EDITING)

5 THE NUMBER OF CHARACTERS
KILLED BY DINOSAURS IN THE MOVIE
(WORKER IN RAPTOR PEN, NEDRY,
RAY ARNOLD, GENNARO, MULDOON)



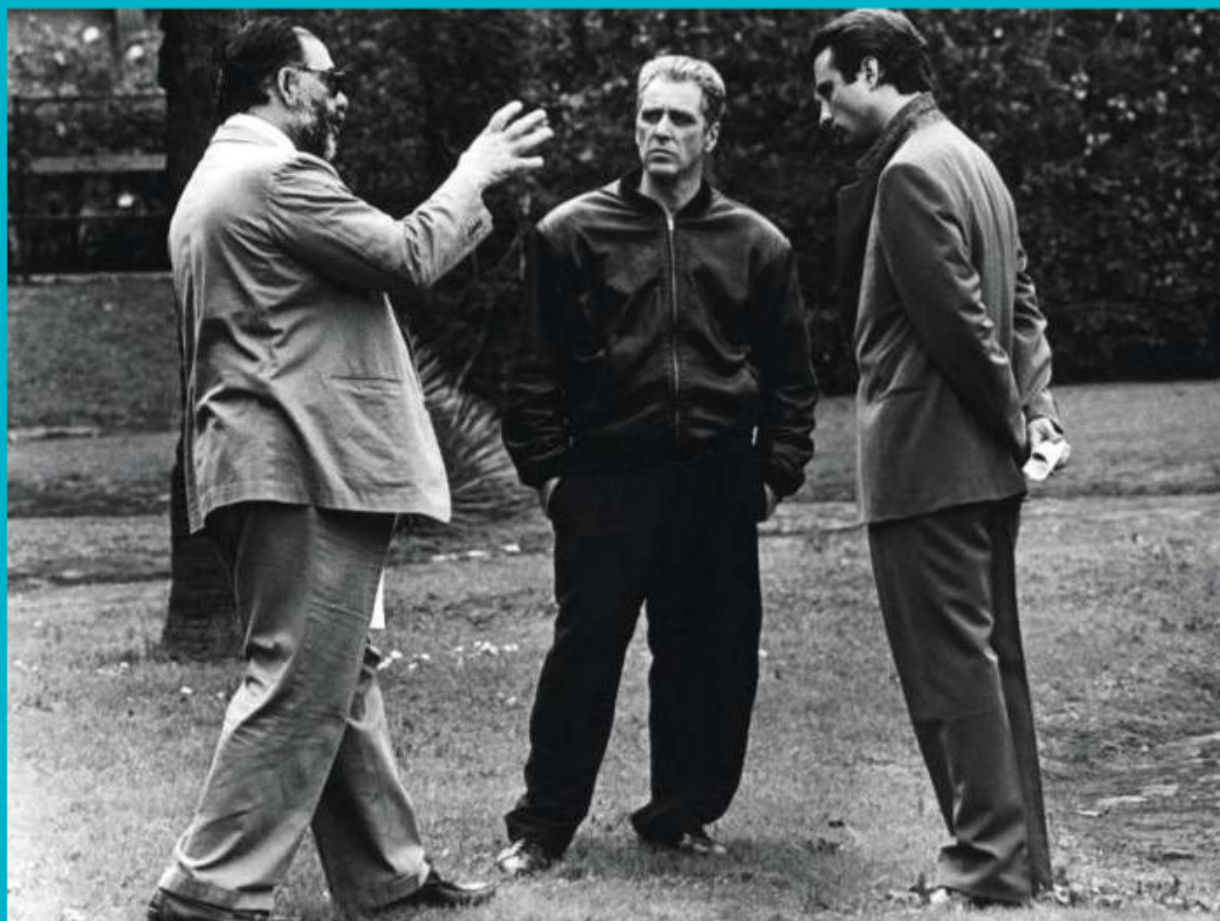


The Life and Death of Michael Corleone

Thirty years on from the divisive *The Godfather Part III*, director **FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA** takes a knife to his film, with extraordinary results. Here he talks to *Empire* about the making of a brand-new masterpiece



Clockwise from left: Three's not always a crowd: the Corleone family line up for the final part of their trilogy; Francis Ford Coppola on set with Al Pacino and Andy Garcia.



SOME OF THEM wouldn't have been able to conjure when they'd last seen each other. Years, certainly. Decades, maybe. But now they'd all come together, in the middle of a global pandemic, on the Paramount studio lot in Los Angeles. They were there to see a film they'd acted in some 30 years before, at the request of their director, Francis Ford Coppola. Apart from it wasn't *quite* the same film. "When the film was over, they were all in tears," he says of the likes of Al Pacino, Diane Keaton and Andy Garcia. "They found the ending so moving. Having the cast endorse it means a lot to me because I'm very fond of all those people." He's clearly still very fond of their characters too, and one in particular — the one who's followed him around his whole career, just there over his shoulder: Michael Corleone.

For the film in question was *The Godfather Coda: The Death Of Michael Corleone*. Which had been once better known to you and me as *The Godfather Part III*, the much-maligned third film in the *Godfather* series. It has been retitled and re-cut by Coppola, a director carrying three decades of unfinished business. And what better time to lay that weight down, than on the upcoming 50th anniversary of the original *The Godfather* movie?

But first, he had to get the studio, who still owned the film, on board. "I was a little Machiavellian," he admits, talking to *Empire* from his home in Napa. "I knew that the new head of Paramount, [Jim Gianopulos], was a very nice gentleman. Studios very often have people who are tough and vulgar and stuff, but they usually also have... they really are nice people. So I said to him, I know that the 50th anniversary of *The Godfather* is coming up and you were probably going to ask me to cooperate by doing something to honour it."

So he got there first, pitching a "much better version" of the third film. The very nice gentleman agreed, and Coppola was off to the races. Even though there was the slight issue of him never wanting to have made the film in the first place...

IT WAS INEVITABLE, given the critical and commercial success of the first and second films, that he would be asked to make a third. But Coppola was resistant, just as he had been before. "I've never felt it was a suitable subject matter for serialisation," says the director. "Even the first movie is, I think, a closed universe. Michael becomes what he becomes, it's a tragic story — he closed the door on his life, and it's over." But there had been a second movie, and then when Paramount came knocking on his door again, some 16 years after the release of *The Godfather Part II*, "I was broke," he admits. "I needed the money."

So Coppola reunited with writer Mario Puzo, who had a clear, striking vision for a third outing, beginning with the title, *The Death Of Michael Corleone*. “I immediately liked that,” says Coppola. “I knew that in the story, he wasn’t going to die. That’s interesting — if you call something *The Death Of Michael Corleone*, and then you see the movie and he *doesn’t* die, that in itself is a statement.” But when he proposed it to Paramount, they didn’t share their vision. “They said, ‘Oh no, it has to be *Godfather*.’ That was the only thing they made me do.”

While the title might have been the only thing the studio insisted on, it was a significant thing; the film’s entire arc bound up in that title. For the studio, it was about the power and marketability (and more specifically, the profitability) of a franchise. It was a battle Coppola wasn’t going to win. And the clock was ticking towards release.

“They wanted to release it on Christmas Day, which was very close,” he remembers. “So, when you’re getting a film ready for release, and especially with a fixed date, it’s a real rush to do it. At the last minute, there were lots of opinions, not only from Paramount, but myself and my editors. Should we do this? Should we do that? But we did our best and [afterwards] I went, ‘Phew, I survived this.’”

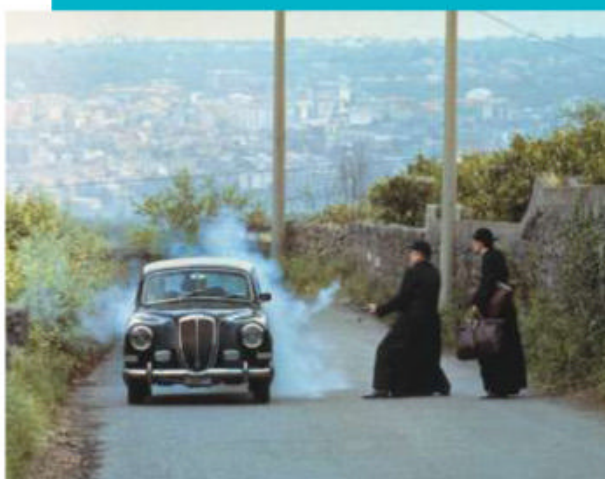
He may have survived it in the short term, but Coppola clearly feels a death of sorts occurred, or a tragedy at the very least. One that befell not necessarily Francis Ford Coppola the director, but Francis Ford Coppola the father.

IT HAD BEGUN with Winona Ryder. The then blazingly hot actor had signed on to play Mary Corleone. She was still shooting *Mermaids*, so the crew shot around her for three weeks, waiting for her to finish production. Then word reached Coppola: she was dropping out. The director was faced with the prospect of closing down production for several weeks while trying to draft in another actor and the studio was suggesting other big names, whom Coppola felt were simply too old to play the teenager.

His kids had always been on his sets and Sofia even appeared in *The Godfather* as a baby Michael Corleone. So it’s perhaps unsurprising that the director’s thoughts turned to his daughter.

“I knew she could do it, but she wasn’t interested,” he says. “She was about 18. She was in college studying to be a painter. I just decided that to avoid stopping for three weeks, and to avoid getting some 35-year-old actress to play a teenager, I would put my own daughter in it.”

The reaction was brutal, prompted, says Coppola, by an article in *Vanity Fair* magazine before the film even came out. “It just damned Sofia,” he says. “And when the film did come out, of course she was pilloried. She was just a kid.



Left, top to bottom: Coppola has a word with Pacino; George Hamilton in an early example of photobombing with Diane Keaton and Pacino; “Yeah, it’s red satin, what’s it to you?”; Not the best way to get a five-star Uber rating, lads; Sofia Coppola in the role originally intended for Winona Ryder.



I mean, imagine to be an 18-year-old girl and be told that it was the worst performance ever, and that it ruined her father’s picture.”

Coppola sees his experience as a father mirrored in the penultimate scene of the film when Mary is shot with a bullet meant for Michael. The silent, broken scream that erupted from Pacino’s mouth in the seconds afterwards becoming an iconic articulation of unimaginable pain. “For me, it was like the end of the movie. In other words, the bullets meant for Michael killed his innocent daughter. The bullets, that criticism [that] was really meant for me, were shot at Sofia and it broke my heart, quite frankly.”

When it came to re-cutting the film, Sofia’s scenes were edited by her father. “My attitude towards Sofia’s performance was that very often it was left on too long,” he says, pointing to seconds being cut, coming in later or bringing in music “so that I could always express the truth, which was she was the apple of her father’s eye and that he was doing it all really for her”.

BUT SOFIA’S PERFORMANCE wasn’t Coppola’s main focus, three decades on. There was only one place he wanted to begin, where it had arguably gone wrong in the first place. Or at



Clockwise
from left: One man and his dog: Michael (Pacino) ponders his life; Archbishop Gilday (Donal Donnelly) needs more than divine intervention; Vincent (Garcia) takes care of (family) business.

least where he lost the most important battle.

"It was the title that made me say, 'Why don't we just call it *The Death Of Michael Corleone*?' says Coppola of his process. "And I did. I changed the graphics and I looked at it. Then I said, 'A big problem with this movie is that you don't understand what's going on at the beginning.'"

The original opened with a pan of the lake that Fredo was murdered on; the house that Michael stood in the window of as the single shot rang out. The house in which his father had ruled before him. The house in which Michael lost his wife and alienated his children. Committed sins that would demand his repentance in *Part III*. But Coppola points out that this isn't really the story.

"In the first cut, the audience didn't really understand what the premise of the film was," he says. "It's very simple what's going on — in an attempt for Michael to absolve himself and to get his family out of the crime world for his children's sake, he has gotten involved with the Catholic church and the Vatican, who are bigger crooks than he is! And that was the whole story."

So, just as *The Godfather* opened on a deal, *the deal* that was central to the film, Coppola begins here with Michael and The Archbishop making a deal, *the deal*. And once Coppola had

established the new start, the rest began to unfurl with ease. "It's like there's a sock that annoys you because there's a thread hanging out of it," he says. "And you pull the thread and you end up reknitting the whole sock, which is what I did."

He took a scalpel to the rest, editing and editing, which has made the film (which he insists is not a director's cut) five minutes shorter. Having a new title and the original intention, the final piece of this work was the ending — Coppola and Puzo's first vision. *Part III* ends with two deaths: Mary Corleone and then, years later in the Old Country, Michael silently falls off his chair into the Sicilian dust, two dogs his only company.

"I have Michael not gone, but worse than death," says Coppola of the new final act. After the final shot of the movie a title card appears which says: "When the Sicilians wish you 'Cent'anni'... it means 'for long life'... and a Sicilian never forgets." Says Coppola: "Michael's death is not that he dies, it's that he *doesn't* die and remembers what they did to his daughter, just as I had to remember what they did to Sofia for the last 30 years."

He doesn't need to physically die, *Empire* suggests to Coppola. For his soul has already gone, and that is death. "That's exactly what it's about," he says with sharp emotion, tears briefly filling his eyes. "There

is nothing on Earth that compares to losing a child, and few people have been in that terrible club, but those who were, know."

What Coppola is now set to send out into the world isn't part of a trilogy. It's a coda. "It's not a third separate film," he insists. "If you like the first *Godfather*, and you liked the second *Godfather*, this isn't the third *Godfather*, this is an epilogue of the two. This is the wraparound."

It's arguably not a film Coppola could have made, or remade, before now, in his ninth decade. "There are some movies that you understand better as an older person, what you did wrong," he says simply.

He's made it right. His business is finished. He's finally said goodbye to Michael Corleone. **TERRI WHITE**



MARIO PUZO'S THE GODFATHER, CODA: THE DEATH OF MICHAEL CORLEONE IS OUT NOW IN SELECT CINEMAS, AND ALSO ON BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL



!
SPOILER
WARNING

THE VIEWING GUIDE

A deep dive into the
must-see moments from
the month's big release



Better Call Saul: Season 5

BETTER CALL SAUL, the *Breaking Bad* prequel that tells the story of how rogue lawyer Jimmy McGill (Bob Odenkirk) becomes flamboyant criminal attorney Saul Goodman, has been threatening to eclipse its progenitor for some time. With its astonishing, ambitious penultimate season, it may have achieved that. Showrunner/co-creator Peter Gould tells us how.

GENE MAKES A STAND

Each season of *Better Call Saul* has started with a black-and-white segment looking at what became of Odenkirk's Jimmy/Saul after his larcenous life was blown towards the end of *Breaking Bad*. The answer: a new life as Gene, manager of a Cinnabon in Nebraska. Except now Gene's been recognised as Saul. But rather than run again, the prologue ends

with Jimmy/Saul/Gene deciding to stay and fight for what passes as his life. "He's a survivor," says Peter Gould. "His first inclination is to run, but maybe he's through with running. Maybe he's found a little backbone. Maybe he's saying to himself, 'I'm Saul Fucking Goodman, why should I run?'" With a final season to go, we'll get to see what could be his last stand. "I think that's pretty exciting."

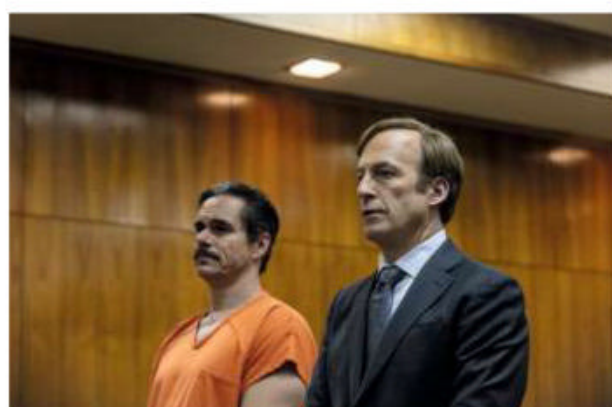
HANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

By and large, Gould has withstood the temptation to overload *Better Call Saul* with cameos from the *Breaking Bad* era. But as the clock ticks inexorably around to the moment when Saul is dragged into Walter White's world, and the drug-war side of the show becomes more prevalent, that temptation is abating. Gloriously so in Episodes 3 and 4, which bring Jimmy — now practising as Saul — face to face with the returning Hank Schrader (Dean Norris) and his partner, Steve Gomez (Steven Michael Quezada). "It was a wonderful moment in the writers' room when we realised that Jimmy was going to have to tangle with law enforcement,"

laughs Gould. "We thought, DEA? Wait a minute, it's time." He and co-creator Vince Gilligan got Norris on the phone, and even prepared a lengthy spiel to try to get him to sign on. "He basically interrupted us and said, 'I'm in.' And there was a lot of security just to try to make it work, so it would be a surprise when it happened."

INDECENT PROPOSAL

"What if we get married?" The relationship between Jimmy and his girlfriend, no-nonsense, clean-cut lawyer Kim Wexler (Rhea Seehorn), has fluctuated constantly throughout the show. But after a particular heinous betrayal in Episode 6, the two erupt into an argument that seems set to end just one way. But then it doesn't, as Kim suddenly proposes to Jimmy. "Jimmy has pushed Kim as far as he's ever pushed her before," explains Gould. "He's made her part of the group of sucks. She's more angry with him than she's ever been. The smart thing to do would be to break up with him. You know, it's hard to pinpoint where all these characters make their



biggest mistakes, but that could be a moment. You could say that this is a terrible mistake.”

LOW DESERT

Stranded in the desert after a seemingly simple cash pick-up goes horribly, bloodily wrong, Jimmy finds himself partnered with the ever-grumpy Mike Ehrmantraut (Jonathan Banks) and forced to trek through the New Mexico desert, with relentless killers on their tail. It leads to a moment where Jimmy has to drink his own piss (“Out of a law firm sports bottle,” laughs Gould), which in many ways is his lowest ebb, and the moment where, as he will do many years later as Gene, he decides to take a stand. It’s here where Saul Goodman, a mere persona up until now, could truly be said to be born. “The way Bob plays it, he reminds me of Humphrey Bogart in *The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre*,” says Gould. “It’s funny, but I also find it compelling because what rallies him is Mike, talking about the people they’re doing everything for. Vince directed it, and he was worried that moment was going to be

anticlimactic or funny. I just felt in my gut that there was something wonderful in that moment.”

KIM STANDS UP TO LALO

Since he arrived in Season 3, Lalo Salamanca (Tony Dalton), a swaggering Mexican drug kingpin, has become one of the most memorable characters in either show. And in the penultimate episode, convinced of betrayal, he bursts into Jimmy and Kim’s home with murder on his mind. Until Kim saves the day with an astonishing tirade in which she convinces Lalo of Jimmy’s innocence. Just. “There’s a chance, as that scene ends, that Lalo decides that both of them are lying attorneys and he’s going to dispose of them,” says Gould. “But he takes a risk. And it felt right for Kim. She’s done this before when Jimmy’s threatened. She rallies. She’s more of a fighter than Jimmy. And she comes right up to the point of getting shot in that scene.”

KIM BREAKS BAD

As Kim doesn’t appear in *Breaking Bad*, viewers have long assumed she must either die in Season 6, or will finally tire of Jimmy/Saul’s criminal BS

and leave him. But their final scene in Season 5, as she outlines plans to disgrace rival lawyer Howard Hamlin to the growing horror of Jimmy, lays it all bare: as Jimmy’s merged into Saul, the real fall from grace has been happening in plain sight. “Kim is as complicated a character as I’ve ever had anything to do with,” says Gould. “I don’t want to lock it down too much, but there are a lot of dimensions to why she does what she does.” We’ll have to wait until late next year or early 2022 to find out her fate.

BETTER KILL LALO

Interestingly, the season ends on Lalo, or as Gould calls him, “the cartel Errol Flynn”, enraged after escaping an attempt on his life, stalking into the night. “We tried cutting it the other way too,” admits Gould. “But it felt right, ending the season with this cloud over all the characters, a cloud with a moustache and a twinkle in his eyes. That felt like a good place to leave it until Season 6.” The wait will be excruciating. Better hurry up. **CHRIS HEWITT**

BETTER CALL SAUL SEASON 5 IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL

THE CULT OF

KIM NEWMAN

The critic and novelist
this month's weirdest
straight-to-video pick

JUD CREMATA'S **Let's Scare**

Julie is the only horror film I've watched at home — where else? — in the last few months which made me turn the lights on afterwards. Like many innovative scary movies, it breaks so many accepted filmmaking rules that not everyone will get into it... so take my recommendation here with caution. Not quite a one-long-take film, it presents continuous action over the course of a busy night as the restless camera tries (by design) to follow too many things at once, so you're always on edge about which corner of the screen a threat might come from. Teenager Emma (Troy Leigh-Anne Johnson) has just settled down for the night — she is staying with her uncle after a bereavement — when her room is invaded by masked intruders, who turn out to be her cousin Taylor (Isabel May) and a posse of lively, impulsive girls. Troublemaker Madison (Odessa A'zion) suggests they pull the same trick on Julie, the mystery new girl who lives in the spooky old house across the road, and things go wrong. The film stays with Emma on her side of the street, getting mixed messages about unfolding disaster and only drawn into the horrors in a suspenseful, shock-packed last act.

Thomas Robert Lee's **Blood Harvest** (aka *The Curse Of Audrey Earnshaw*) is set in 1973 in an isolated, Amish-style, un-technological Canadian community which trusts in God to provide crops. The farms of the devout are blighted and the only high-yielding land in the county belongs to shunned Agatha Earnshaw (Catherine Walker), who is hiding her fatherless 17-year-old daughter Audrey (Jessica Reynolds) from the



CULT HERO OF THE MONTH JOHNNY KEVORKIAN

The Cypriot-British director Johnny Kevorkian died in November 2020, at the young age of 48. He made four shorts and two features, which reflects the difficulty of bringing ambitious, mid-budget genre projects to fruition in the UK rather than lack of industry or invention. *The Disappeared* (2008) and *Await Further Instructions* (2018) follow the Hammer House Of Horror tradition of small-scale supernatural activity with a *Play For Today* touch in illustrating social issues through confrontational drama. The former, a ghost story set on a council estate (which also turns out to be a vampire tale), was made in an era when the tabloid buzz-phrase was "Broken Britain". *Await Further Instructions*, about a fractured family uniting for a Christmas dinner ruined by a possessed television set, is a horror-comic parable of the rifts exacerbated by Brexit. It's a tragedy that Johnny won't be around to chronicle whatever comes next.

Congregation. Accusations of witchcraft fly and it becomes plain that diabolical influences are at work. It's a slow-burning folk-horror tale with a lot of earthy, bloody, creepy business, and a nasty yet uplifting payoff.

Jonathan Milott and Cary Murnion's violent home-invasion picture **Becky** gives erstwhile *Paul Blart* star Kevin James a change-of-pace role as a swastika-tatted white supremacist. All the Nazis need to start his race war is a symbolic key, but they underestimate how formidable a seriously pissed-off 13-year-old (Lulu Wilson) is in a game of deadly, woodland hide-and-seek involving major misuse of

middle-school stationery supplies, an outboard motor and a lawnmower. It's *Home Alone* with gore scenes and no comedy, but the dead-eyed, pint-sized Wilson — her Becky is cold fury in a woollen animal-face hat even before Nazis kill her dog and her dad — is interestingly terrifying even in the film's relatively few quiet moments.

Another creepy kid crops up in **Repression** (aka *Marionette*), a Dutch-Scotch blend of *Case 39* and *The Medusa Touch*. Angelic moppet Elijah Wolf scrawls pictures that foretell disaster for the likes of Peter Mullan, Rebecca Front and Thekla Reuten. Wolf is supremely effective at underage malice and menace — after his nastiest moments, he sneers, "But I'm only an ickle, ickle boy."

The premise of **Butt Boy** is laid out in a police chief's "so you're telling me..." speech: "A white, married male... has been secretly running around putting objects, animals and children up his asshole, then he somehow digests them, and he does this in sprees — almost in serial killer fashion. Is that about it?" And, yes, that's the story of this small miracle of what-did-I-just-watch? genius. Uptight butt boy Chip Gutchell (director Tyler Cornack), who's addicted to disappearing things up his back passage, is hunted by wired cop Russel Fox (Tyler Rice). Bizarrely effective in the mode of *The Greasy Strangler*, it has a fractured, off-centre vibe of its own. The last act goes exactly where you think (or dread) it will: into the limbo beyond Chip's sphincter.

Illustration: Neil Edwards. Alamy

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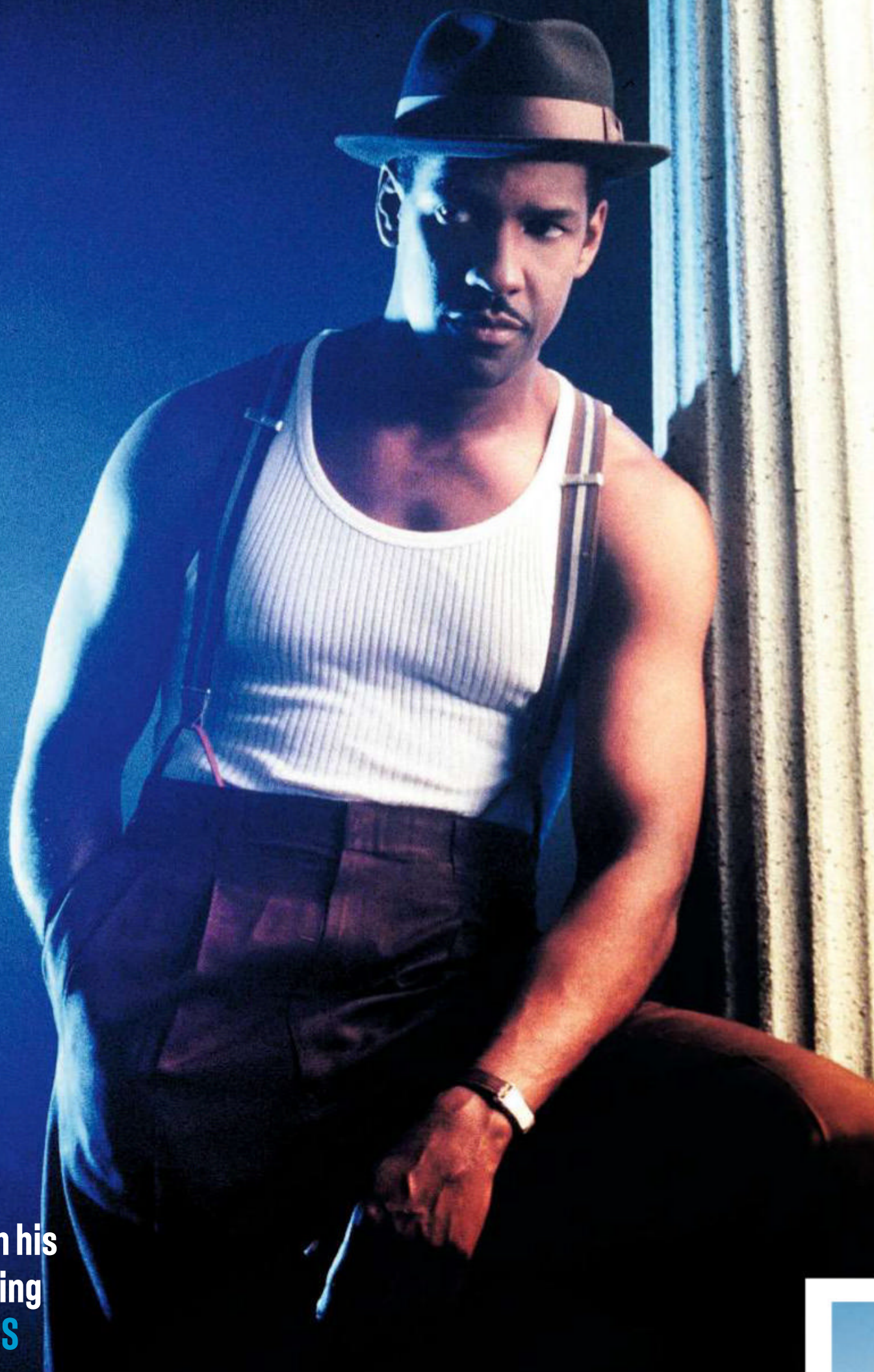
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HANDMADE IN ENGLAND

The Devil's in the details

Director Carl Franklin looks back on his neo-noir, Denzel Washington-starring 1995 classic, **DEVIL IN A BLUE DRESS**



DENZEL WASHINGTON AND Carl Franklin used to play a little game on the set of the '40s-set noir thriller, *Devil In A Blue Dress*. A very strange little game. Strange, that is, to everyone but them. "What it is," explains Franklin, "is Chester Himes had written a couple of books that dealt with a similar subject matter. One was *The Quality Of Hurt*. He just seemed to be so immersed in his pain. And Denzel and I had this standard joke about pain with each other. It was a running gag." So every day the director and his star would greet each other with, "I hope you feel bad"/"Oh, thank you!", or a variation thereof.

"The more pain we could give each other, the more pleasure we were supposed to get out of it," Washington tells *Empire*, with a chuckle.

That maxim also applies neatly to *Devil In A Blue Dress*. For most of its 102-minute running time, the more pain that's inflicted on Washington's gumshoe-in-training, Easy Rawlins, as he becomes embroiled in a labyrinthine mystery in post-World War II Los Angeles, the more pleasure the audience derives. Because *Devil In A Blue Dress* is, along with *L.A. Confidential*, one of the best examples there is of the modern noir movie. Based on the first of

Walter Mosley's series of books featuring Easy Rawlins, it's a superb detective thriller that benefits from excellent performances across the board, has a wonderful sense of time and place and, as a movie about a Black hero in a deeply white world, written and directed by a Black director, has more on its mind than just aping, say, *Chinatown*'s best moves.

"That did appeal to me," admits Franklin, who came to *Devil In A Blue Dress* fresh from another excellent modern noir, his thriller *One False Move*. "Because part of it is my own story. My family had come from Texas, just as Easy had

Alamy, RGA, Shutterstock



Left: Don Cheadle, hand-picked by Franklin, as Mouse — Easy's best friend, but a dangerously loose cannon. **Below left:** The PI emerges from a rather snazzy 1947 Pontiac Streamliner.



Far left: Denzel Washington cuts a '40s dash as detective Easy Rawlins. **Left:** Director Carl Franklin on location with his star. **Below left:** Easy with DeWitt Albright (Tom Sizemore), who's searching for (right) Jennifer Beals' Daphne Monet.

Jesse Beaton. "Denzel was already interested in that character," says Franklin. "He was not the standard gumshoe, like Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade, who are already pretty cynical. Easy starts out pretty positive."

One thing in particular helped Washington zero in on who Easy was. "There were not a lot of photographs of that whole scene at the time," says Franklin. "Our casting director, Vickie Thomas, grew up in LA and had a picture of two little boys sitting on a porch. They were probably eight, nine years old. And Denzel asked her if he could keep that picture, because that was Easy and Mouse, and he kept it with him all the time."

Mouse is the film's ace in the hole, Easy's best friend, a trigger-happy, borderline psychopathic, shoot-first-and-maybe-ask-no-questions-at-all kind of guy who shows up halfway through and gives the film a jolt of uneasy energy that sustains it all the way to the end. Franklin had worked with a young Don Cheadle on a student film a few years back and lobbied hard to cast him. A previous version of the script, written by Mosley, had even excised the character completely. "That was a studio thing," says Franklin. "You get hung up with those developers, man, and they can take something that's good and compromise it. But you can't take Mouse out. If you lose Mouse, you lose who Easy is. His relationship with Mouse, with a killer, is a major, internal conflict for him."

Smart and surefooted, *Devil In A Blue Dress* isn't quite a postmodern riff on film noir, but it does have its wicked way with a number of the genre's staples. The title alone, and decades' worth of noir stories, prompt us to imagine Beals' Daphne Monet as a callous, cold-hearted femme fatale, setting Easy up for a sucker punch; the reality is very different. "We were criticised because of that," recalls Franklin. "But it was a spin on the genre. Easy was not the typical protagonist and she was not the typical femme fatale."

Over the years, *Devil In A Blue Dress*' reputation has only grown, and it's now considered to be one of Washington's finest movies and something of a modern classic. But its reception back then is a tale as old as time: of critical and audience indifference. Until he made *The Equalizer 2* a couple of years ago, Washington had never been in a sequel. But had *Devil In A Blue Dress* hit, he would have popped his franchise cherry a lot sooner. "There were only three books at the time — *A Red Death* and *White Butterfly*," says Franklin. "And the intent was to do them. But noir was a difficult genre to market to the modern audience. But now, it's as though everybody's seen it. And it's like, 'Where were you folks when we came out?'" They were too busy hurting Carl Franklin and Denzel Washington's feelings. And we don't love it. Not one bit. **CHRIS HEWITT**

DEVIL IN A BLUE DRESS IS OUT NOW ON BLU-RAY

THE RANKING

Four *Empire* writers.
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definitively.

Sean Connery movies

Chris: We're here to talk about the work of Sean Connery. And there's only one place to start: James Bond. Because when you talk about Connery, you have to talk about Bond. The two are inextricably linked. He was the first, he was the alpha.

Helen: His ex-Bond work is his best. But he's a great James Bond. He set the template. Connery's Bond was the one by which all others are judged.

Dan: I agree with Sidney Lumet, who said that Connery's Bond was a great performance because Connery is not like Bond at all. Everyone thought he was basically playing himself. He wasn't. He wasn't close to Fleming's conception of the character at all.

Chris: The received wisdom is that it all comes to a head in *Goldfinger*.

Ian: It's the film that leans most heavily on him. There's not a lot of action in *Goldfinger*. It's all about his passion, and how he had his balls nearly lasered.

Helen: It's that sweet spot. It's between being comfortable in the role, and not being bored yet.

Ian: Dan mentioned Sidney Lumet and he made *The Hill* after *Goldfinger*. Is that the point where he's thinking, "Let's do something different now?"

Chris: *The Hill* is interesting because it's during the main Bond era, but sets up the post-Bond era for him. Lumet was the director he worked with the most. It's fantastic. It's a brutal film.

Ian: It's a performance of intense defiance.

Chris: He knew Bond wasn't

going to go on forever. He certainly wasn't going to be playing Bond in 1983. He also did *Marnie* around the same time. It's seen as a lesser Hitchcock. Does that mean it's a lesser Connery?

Helen: It's a good performance, but he was maybe slightly miscast in that role.

Ian: I think it's a commentary on Bond. That controlling aspect of his character, I think he was better at that. He was better at that than warmth and being loveable. He's better when he's being a bastard.

Chris: I think he had a unique ability to blend the two. In some of his key roles — *The Untouchables*, *Highlander* — he's a loveable bastard. That's not easy to pull off.

Helen: Curmudgeonly is my favourite Connery, to be

OUR CRITICS



IAN FREER

The only man alive who can't do a Connery impression. Shocking.



CHRIS HEWITT

Favourite Connery gag: when does Sean like to go to Wimbledon? Tennis.



DAN JOLIN

Sees Connery as a father figure. Even in the red Zardoz nappy. Troubling.



HELEN O'HARA

Has no time for 007. Is always rooting for the baddie.



Illustration: Jacey

honest. That's what I grew up with, the grumpy old man with a heart of gold underneath. **Dan:** You see him gradually settling down into the role which defined him in my mind, even more than Bond. And that's the father figure, the mentor, curmudgeonly or otherwise. By the time you're at *Time Bandits*, he was definitely the surrogate father figure that I wanted. **Ian:** Towards the end of the '70s, you get to the stinkers. But the standout of that decade is *The Man Who Would Be King*. **Dan:** The joy of it, more than anything, is the union of Connery and Caine. These two '60s icons coming together. And it's a real Boy's Own, classic, pulpy adventure. It's a more fundamental Connery movie than *Goldfinger*.

Helen: Is it time to talk about *Highlander*? Because somebody obviously looked at the title and thought, "We've got to get Sean Connery." He wasn't going to play the Highlander, that was gonna be a French dude. But he's an Egyptian who became an adoptive Spaniard. It doesn't make a lick of sense to hire Sean Connery, but I'm glad they did. **Chris:** *Highlander* is a pile of old pish. **Ian:** I'm with Chris. **Dan:** No way. **Helen:** Look, it doesn't have to be good, it's a classic. **Chris:** That's quite the oxymoronic statement. Look, it's fun at times. Never more fun than when Connery's on screen. But if it didn't have him stealing the show, it wouldn't be as well remembered. **Ian:** Now we're coming up to *Untouchables*, is it worth talking about his skill with accents? He was an actor in the old-school tradition where he didn't even try. **Chris:** See, I think that's a movie-star move. People go to see Sean Connery, you don't need to get lost with him faffing around with an accent. **Helen:** I feel *The Hunt For Red October* gets away with the Scottish thing because he's Ukrainian. Maybe it's meant to represent that? I'm choosing to believe it was a choice. **Chris:** No-one told the other actors. They're all doing their best, and Sean's just walked in off the golf course. But I don't care. He won an Oscar for *The Untouchables* for playing an Irishman with a fairly strong Scottish accent. **Ian:** He has one of cinema's great speeches in that movie. He pulls a knife, you pull a gun. **Chris:** He can knock the hell out of those speeches. He's so gruff and irascible and likeable. He drags the movie, and Costner, because Elliot Ness is a wet blanket of a man when they meet, by the lapels. **Helen:** And he looks great in the tweed. **Dan:** He also gets one of the greatest death scenes in cinema. **Chris:** *Highlander* and *The Untouchables* gave his career

a bit of a renaissance, and led to *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade*. Spielberg and Lucas were trying to think of the perfect person to play Indiana Jones' dad and went, "James Bond". But Henry Jones is so un-Bond-like. He's a bookworm. **Helen:** It's latent in him. You see where Indy got it all from. **Ian:** It was Spielberg's idea, like all good ideas. **Dan:** There was something about him. He could be the father figure to anyone. It doesn't matter how old you are. He's your dad. **Chris:** It's my favourite of the Indy movies, precisely because of that relationship between Indy and Henry. **Helen:** It's got so many shades to it. Even when there's some kind of rapprochement, they still go off into the sunset bickering. That moment when he's holding Indy in the abyss and pulling him up is gorgeous. **Chris:** When he calls him "Indiana" for the first time. Oh, that's so good. It's my number-one Connery. **Helen:** *The Hunt For Red October* for me. **Dan:** It's solid, but it never blew me away. **Helen:** I love the problem-solving mystery aspect as Jack Ryan's trying to figure out what Connery is doing, and when they meet it's a great not-quite father-son relationship. It's practically perfect. **Dan:** It's no *Crimson Tide*. **Ian:** The biggest film of the '90s is one I don't care for at all. It's *The Rock*. **Chris:** Why don't you like it? **Ian:** I've never been the biggest Michael Bay fan, although this is probably his best film. **Chris:** It's the one that flirts most with coherence. **Helen:** I love *The Rock*. The dialogue is really fun and clever, Nicolas Cage had reined in his weirdness just enough, and Connery keeps setting himself up for zingers. **Dan:** It's Connery coming back to Bond in a proper way. *The Rock* is the closest we've come as an audience to getting that, and enjoying him in that way. **Chris:** Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

THE TOP TEN



INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE (1989)
Chris: "What Spielberg's third Indy lacks in cinematic brio, it makes up for in heart, as Connery's disapproving dad gradually reveals his son's hidden humanity."



THE UNTOUCHABLES (1987)
Ian: "Connery's Irish beat cop-turned-Eliot Ness mentor sees Connery in all his irascible but wise splendour."



GOLDFINGER (1964)
Ian: "The definitive big-screen Bond. Stylish, intelligent, charming and ruthless. Nobody does 007 better."



THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING (1975)
Dan: "Caine and Connery: cinema's greatest scoundrel double act."



THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER (1990)
Helen: "Connery was born to play an honourable man wily enough to outwit the entire USSR."



THE ROCK (1996)
Helen: "Half the fun of this classic (really) is watching Connery wink at his own screen history."



THE HILL (1964)
Chris: "His first, and best, Sidney Lumet outing, Connery on blistering, blustering, anti-Bond form."



FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE (1963)
Chris: "His second 007 sees him grow ever more comfortable in the sharp suits and sharper one-liners."



HIGHLANDER (1986)
Dan: "It's daft and you can clearly see the wires, but Sir Sean is on full twinkle as dandy mentor Juan."



THE NAME OF THE ROSE (1986)
THE TIME BANDITS (1981)
Dan: "*Time Bandits* is huge fun. Can't believe it's only just scraped in."

AGREE? DISAGREE? WRITE IN AND TELL US AT:
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10 OF THE BEST

Team *Empire* on
the month's essential
movies and TV

PICK OF
THE MONTH

DAVID BYRNE'S AMERICAN UTOPIA

OUT 11 JANUARY / CERT 12 / 105 MINS

DVD BR

A performance film as profound and ebullient as David Byrne and Jonathan Demme's *Stop Making Sense* should only happen — dare we say it — once in a lifetime. Yet with *American Utopia*, an end-of-run staging of Byrne's Broadway show directed by Spike Lee, the former Talking Heads frontman has delivered one more milestone in the concert movie cannon.

Between a peerless setlist of the band's crowd-pleasers, solo work and collaborations, Byrne — besuited, barefoot, and openly off-kilter — speaks self-deprecatingly about the things that matter to him, from voting and connections to crisps. Behind the camera, Lee obliterates the audience divide with intimate framing of Byrne and his 11-strong band, here harnessed to their instruments for a freer, more kinetic performance. Galvanising and comforting all at once, *American Utopia* is Byrne's most personal and political piece of work yet. **BETH WEBB**



RELIC

OUT 18 JANUARY / CERT 15 / 89 MINS

DVD BR

Inspired by her grandmother's battle with Alzheimer's, Natalie Erika James' assured debut is the best Aussie horror since *The Babadook* and a moving meditation on mortality, motherhood and memory. After elderly widow Edna (Robyn Nevin) goes missing, daughter Kay (Emily Mortimer) and granddaughter Sam (Bella Heathcote) arrive at her ramshackle home to be greeted by locked doors and Post-it notes. When Edna returns a few days later with no recollection of her recent walkabout, she has a nasty mark on her chest that keeps spreading. As an increasingly frantic Kay struggles to cope with her mother's dementia and her own feelings of grief, long-buried secrets and a malignant presence slowly come to the fore, with the house transforming into a terrifying, expressionistic representation of Edna's decaying mind. But despite its broody Lynchian leanings and body-horror climax, *Relic* remains, at its core, a heart-breaking family drama. **MARK SALISBURY**



INVESTIGATION OF A CITIZEN ABOVE SUSPICION

OUT 18 JANUARY / CERT 18 / 109 MINS

BR

This won the Best Foreign Language Oscar, then slipped so far off the radar the paranoid would deduce there must have been a conspiracy to suppress Elio Petri's masterwork. It opens like the first act of a *Columbo* episode reimaged by Dario Argento, as a buttoned-bourgeois Gian-Maria Volonte kills his exotic mistress (Florinda Bolkan) then arranges all sorts of incriminating evidence around the crime scene. Only then does he go to work, and is revealed as the departing head of the Rome Homicide Police, moving to the political section. His crime turns out to be an elaborate thumb-snooking act of self-destruction aimed at society in general. The mystery becomes more surreal and political as the ranting killer cop — Volonte is splendidly theatrical — does everything he can to establish his guilt but literally can't get arrested. Very demanding, very rewarding. **KIM NEWMAN**



THE MAN WHO HAUNTED HIMSELF

OUT 31 DECEMBER / CERT PG / 90 MINS

DVD

The malevolent doppelgänger is usually a staple of sci-fi and fantasy: *Star Trek*, *Red Dwarf* and *Futurama* have all had their share of (often goatee-sporting) evil twins. So it's disconcerting to see a despicable double of Roger Moore terrorising his hapless counterpart through the humdrum setting of a dreary 1970s London — but it's also hellishly good fun. Starched City exec Harold Pelham (Moore) unwittingly unleashes his alter ego after a car crash on the M4, and subsequently finds his fastidiously structured life being slowly dismantled by the antagonistic nega-Harold. More Moore is all the excuse a pre-Bond Rog needed to bust out two wonderful performances in what he always claimed was his favourite of his own films: a delirious, psychotronic curio from versatile director Basil Dearden, who tragically — and spookily — died in a car crash on the M4 the following year. **NEIL ALCOCK**

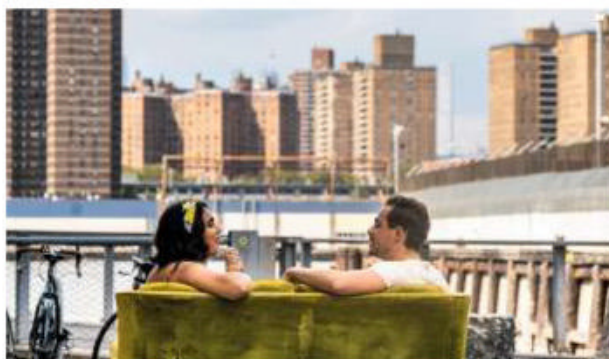


SHIRLEY

OUT 4 JANUARY / CERT 15 / 107 MINS

DVD BR

Josephine Decker and Shirley Jackson were made for each other: for her latest trick, the experimental indie auteur explored the life and mind of the gothic-horror author — bending reality and teasing out delicious truths in order to make a biopic like never before. *Shirley* sees Elisabeth Moss give the performance of a lifetime as the titular woman on the verge, in terrific company alongside Michael Stuhlbarg as her husband Stanley, and Logan Lerman and Odessa Young as the unsuspecting couple who get caught in their web of secrets. It's a dangerous, sensual picture, exploring the bond between Shirley and Young's character Rose, as well as the trauma and psychological abuse caused by isolation, art, and writer's block. People are thrilled to be horrible, everyone finds joy in hurting one another. It's a dizzying paradox — and a towering triumph of a film. **ELLA KEMP**



THE BROKEN HEARTS GALLERY

OUT 18 JANUARY / CERT 12 / 105 MINS

DVD

A good romcom is hard to find these days, but *The Broken Hearts Gallery*'s delightful mix of heart, humour and charm offers a strong case for why there should be more. The many laudable facets of Natalie Krinsky's directorial debut are exemplified in Geraldine Viswanathan's bubbly performance as Lucy, a quirky gallery assistant who pulls herself out of a depressing break-up by fashioning a gallery made up of mementos she's hoarded from previous relationships. She finds a home for her display in a building belonging to hotel developer Nick (Dacre Montgomery), and their meet-cute paves the way for equally effective moments of showy romance and smaller, sweeter beats. Beyond being unapologetically inclusive, it's not a romcom that reinvents the wheel. But the message of vulnerability in love lands, and Viswanathan's vivacious star-power alone makes this a gallery worth visiting. **AMON WARMANN**

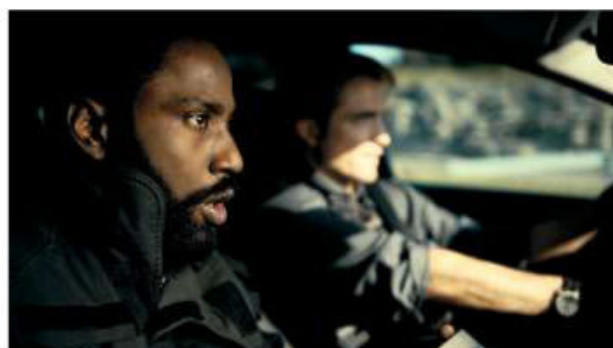


JOINT SECURITY AREA

OUT 18 JANUARY / CERT 15 / 109 MINUTES

BR

Joint Security Area can tend to fly under the radar when it comes to the lauded work of Park Chan-wook, but it's more than just a footnote in the filmmaker's oeuvre. A murder mystery set along the precarious line of the Korean Demilitarized Zone, which divides the Peninsula roughly in half, there's a tragically sweet friendship at its core — the childlike enthusiasm of interactions between a group of soldiers is tinged with tragedy, with the knowledge that it won't end well. While not quite as luridly stylish, it has all of the delightful hallmarks of Park's later works, taking unexpected swerves in both narrative and tone — such as the grim comedy of a soldier tearfully sending away a puppy that he can't keep, telling it to "watch out for landmines". *Joint Security Area* is equally hilarious and heartbreaking in its clash of intimate male relationships and the cruelty of 'duty'. **KAMBOLE CAMPBELL**

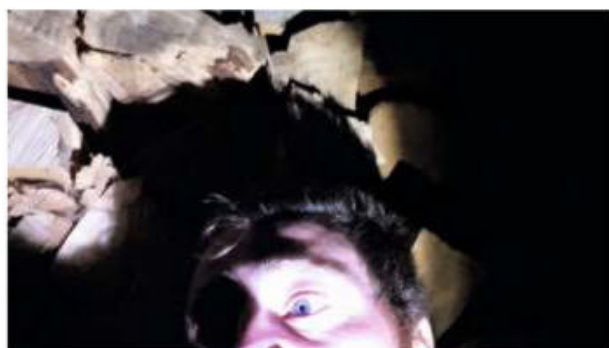


TENET

OUT NOW / CERT 12 / 150 MINS

DVD BR 4K

Christopher Nolan's got one word for you: confusion, probably. This mind-bending thriller stars John David Washington as 'The Protagonist', a secret agent trying to stop billionaire Andrei Sator (Kenneth Branagh) from starting World War III through the use of entropy-reversing technology. Nolan's fascination with time deepens to mesmerising effect with a series of stunning set-pieces, the paradoxical nature of the plot turning each action sequence into an intricate puzzle of cause and effect. Featuring glamorous locations and a starry supporting cast of Robert Pattinson, Elizabeth Debicki and Aaron Taylor-Johnson, it's clear there's been no expense spared in allowing Nolan to execute his vision. The first big blockbuster to brave cinemas after the UK's initial lockdown, *Tenet*'s speedy release on DVD, Blu-ray and VOD in December means audiences can catch up with Nolan's latest at home, and try to understand it at their leisure. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

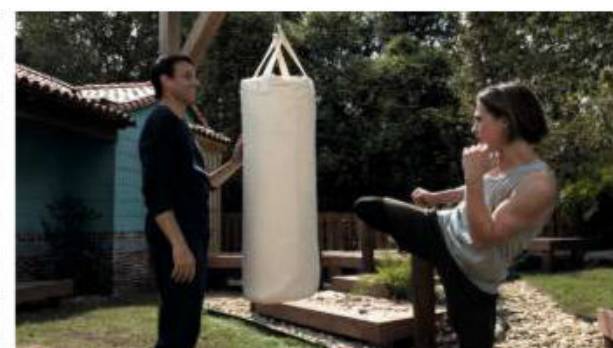


HOST

OUT 18 JANUARY / CERT 15 / 56 MINS

DVD BR

In a year fairly bulging with cracking horror flicks, from *Relic* to *His House*, the best of them all might just be a micro-budget slab of ingenuity filmed in its cast's kitchens and bedrooms. Much has been made of how *Host* is relatable because its plot — a group of friends host a séance over Zoom, only for things to go horribly wrong when a demon rocks up and won't log off — hits home with everyone who's had to endure the sheer ignominy of online calls during the pandemic. And while that's true, the film's success is down to how expertly Savage escalates the film's impressive and inventive array of shocks and scares, with his excellent cast (all friends in real life) selling the hell out of their terror and tears. The last 20 minutes (of a film that isn't even an hour long, and thus pushes the boundaries of what is and isn't considered a film) is a relentless assault of images that marks Savage out as a serious talent to watch. **CHRIS HEWITT**



COBRA KAI: SEASONS 1 & 2

OUT NOW / CERT 15 / 600 MINS

DVD BR

During the first season of *Cobra Kai*, bad boy fiftysomething sensei Johnny Lawrence (William Zabka) aggressively advises one of his meek, nerdy students to "flip the script" and rewrite himself from victim to badass. There's no better way to encapsulate what this not-so-guilty pleasure of a show does with '80s fave *The Karate Kid*, as it tongue-in-cheekily riffs on the idea that maybe blond bully Lawrence was the real hero of that movie, and Daniel-san (Ralph Macchio) the villain. Thankfully, it's not so cut-and-dried as that, but *Cobra Kai* has a lot of fun messing around with both our nostalgia and expectations. It is somehow simultaneously a tribute to and a pastiche of the *Karate Kid* movies, bringing back original cast members (including Macchio and Martin Kove), while wittily bequeathing their analogue dramas to a new, digital-native generation. **DAN JOLIN**

THE STORY OF THE SHOT

How iconic
images came
to life

The Shining

PERHAPS IT STILL echoes 40 years on because Kubrick's horror overflows with iconic images: the bloody elevator tide, the butchered twins, Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) leering through the axe-smashed door. "Heeeeere's Johnny!"

But the core of *The Shining* comes just before this beat: it is the fear in Shelley Duvall's eyes, as her husband tries to break into the bathroom to kill her. Their son has already struggled out of the window into the snow-suffocated outside, but she can't fit to follow. Instead we see her desperate but selfless: "Danny, I can't get out. Run. Run and hide. Run. Quick!"

Whether *The Shining* is the scariest film ever made is an eternal debate, but it certainly offers one of the most sustained depictions of fear.

"It was only with the greatest difficulty that Shelley was able to create and sustain... an authentic sense of hysteria," said Kubrick. So he, it could be said, drove her to it.

"He beat Shelley into that performance," Nicholson told

Empire in 2009. "She's fantastic, in my opinion. By 'beat it out', I mean, he's not a Method director: 'Come on, Shell, just...' I called it the toughest job that any actor that I've seen had, because 40 per cent of that picture, she's hysterical. And when the shooting schedule is that long: imagine months and months and *months*, as an actor, of coming to work having to come up with hysteria."

The extent to which Duvall realised why she had been cast, and what would be required, is open to debate. "I had an insight into it that she didn't have," Nicholson recalled. He had wanted Kubrick to pick Jessica Lange. "I said, 'Shelley Duvall? What's the idea, Stanley?' And he says, 'Well, you can't... you gotta have somebody in that part that maybe the audience would also like to kill a little bit!'"

Co-writer Diane Johnson is quoted in John Baxter's Kubrick biography as saying Duvall disliked the experience. "She told me later that she was driven crazy by the process of

Hi, honey, I'm home: Wendy (Shelley Duvall) tries to avoid her homicidal husband.

shooting this film. She felt that Kubrick didn't like her and drove her unmercifully."

Duvall has been more circumspect in public. At the time she told Roger Ebert that maintaining the emotional state the character required was "excruciating", but after hours of crying, she "went home very contented". She's quoted in David Hughes' *The Complete Kubrick* as saying the shoot did make her unwell: "I was really in and out of ill health because the stress of the role was so great." In a 2011 interview with ComingSoon.net she reflected on her relationship with Kubrick: "We had our moments when we laughed and joked around on set, but then there were times that we just exploded at each other!" She saw Wendy as being a "battered but loving housewife who supports her husband", while Kubrick apparently "wanted a tough, strong, independent woman".

Whatever the contrasts in their intent, the result speaks, or screams, for itself. "It was a hell of a shoot, but he got what he wanted out of me!" **NEV PIERCE**

THE SHINING IS OUT NOW ON DVD,
BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL

INSTANT TRIVIA



1

The set carpenters had to make stronger doors once they realised how easily Jack Nicholson — a former volunteer firefighter — could smash through their props.

2

The snowy slope Danny Torrance slides down was actually made of a mountain of salt.

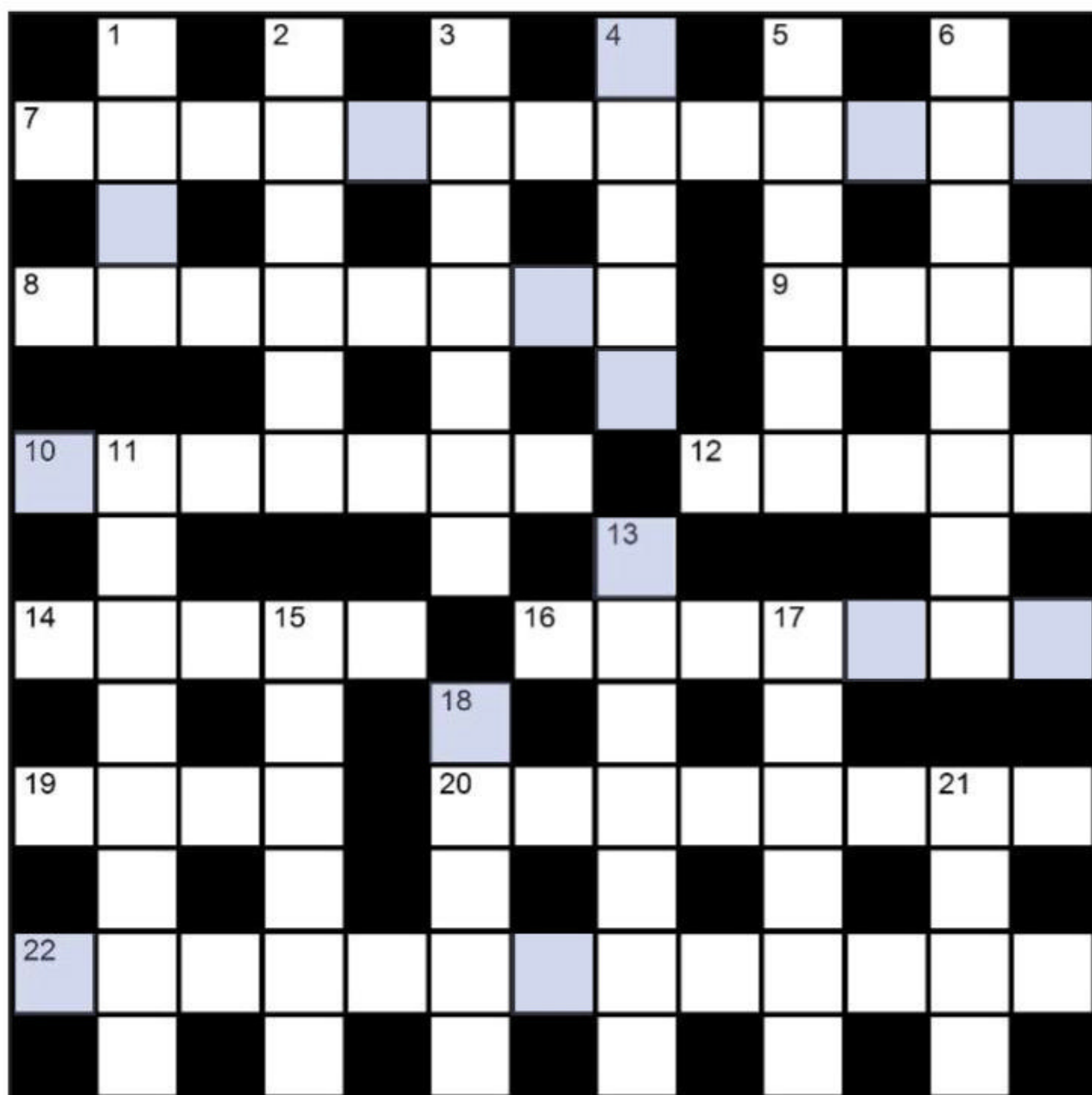
3

Legend has it that 60 doors were used for this scene. On the commentary track, Steadicam inventor (and operator) Garrett Brown recalls the initial bedroom door-axing (before Jack reaches the bathroom) requiring "six or eight".

4

The shoot for *The Shining* was supposed to be 17 weeks. It took 51.

CROSSWORD AND COMPETITION



ACROSS

- 7 Director Miranda July's recent take on a con movie (13)
- 8 It featured Daniel Day-Lewis in pugilistic mode (3,5)
- 9 Black American Princesses in short (1,1,1,1)
- 10 This featured James Gandolfini in his final film role (3,4)
- 12 Matt who first appeared on screen in *Mystic Pizza* (5)
- 14 It featured the smartest guys in the room (5)
- 16 In which Elvis Presley was Spec.5 Tulsa McLean (1,1,5)
- 19 South African action film starring India Eisley and Samuel L. Jackson (4)
- 20 Musical that received 14 nominations at the 89th Oscars (2,2,4)
- 22 This seasonal release starred Emilia Clarke and Emma Thompson (4,9)

DOWN

- 1 Black comedy army hospital classic set in the Korean war (1,1,1,1)
- 2 Sailor voiced by Brad Pitt in a 2003 DreamWorks animation (6)
- 3 He directed *Sid & Nancy* (4,3)
- 4 *Sliding* — (Gwyneth Paltrow, John Hannah) (5)
- 5 The surname is Streisand (6)
- 6 Wesley Snipes action movie with the tagline "Something dangerous is in the air" (4,4)
- 11 That cannibalistic Mr Lecter (8)
- 13 "Crime runs in the blood" read the tagline for this 2020 Craig Fairbrass starrer (7)
- 15 World War II special agent portrayed by Anna Neagle (6)
- 17 Role played by both Sue Lyon (1962) and Dominique Swain (1997) (6)
- 18 Cameron Crowe's Hawaii-set romcom (5)
- 21 Russell Crowe-starring 2014 biblical epic (4)

COMPETITION ENDS 18 JANUARY

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, actress, director or character. Text 'EMPIRE' to 83070, followed by your answer, name and address (with a space between each element of your message!). Texts cost 50p plus standard operator costs. Lines close at midnight, 18 JANUARY. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

JANUARY ANSWERS ACROSS: 1 Michael, 5 Niger, 8 Moana, 9 Netflix, 10 Cinderella Man, 11 Nadine, 12 Herbie, 15 Michael Powell, 18 Sandler, 19 Metro, 20 Storm, 21 Streets. **DOWN:** 1 Mimic, 2 Chained, 3 A Rage In Harlem, 4 Linney, 5 Natalie Dormer, 6 Golem, 7 Roxanne, 11 Nemesis, 13 Breathe, 14 Cloris, 16 Congo, 17 Lions.

ANAGRAM MICHAELA COEL

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Texts cost 50p + standard network rate. Ask the bill payer's permission before entering. Entries must be received before 19 January or will not be valid (but the cost of the text may still be charged). One winner will be selected at random. Competition promoted by Bauer Consumer Media Limited t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winner is final and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winner will be notified, by phone (on the number the text was sent), between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will call the winner a maximum of three times and leave one message. If the winner does not answer the phone or respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner and the original winner will not win a prize. Entrants must be over 18, resident in the UK and not be employed by Empire. The prize is non-negotiable with no cash alternative. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: <http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/>. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full Ts&Cs see <http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html>.

WIN!

PUROPRO HEALTHY EARS WIRELESS HEADPHONES



With any luck, many of us will be getting some excellent new viewing hardware round about now — so what you need to go with it is a pair of top-notch new headphones. Lucky, then, that this month we've got these PuroPro Healthy Ears cans from Puro Sound Labs, worth £199, to give away to one winner. With a slick design and studio-grade audio quality, PuroPro is also committed to protecting hearing, with volume-limiting ensuring a safe level of decibels while not compromising on clear, crisp sound. And you won't be annoyed by other people on the bus, as adjustable Digital Noise Reduction Technology cuts out exterior noise. To win a pair, crack the crossword, solve the anagram and text your answer to the number below. Good luck!

PURO SOUND LABS PUROPRO WIRELESS HEADPHONES
ARE AVAILABLE ON AMAZON NOW



CLASSIC SCENE

Standout sequences
from the
great movies

NETWORK Chosen by **GEORGE CLOONEY**

GEORGE CLOONEY: “My favourite movie is *Network*. Paddy Chayefsky was a brilliant writer. There’s the scene with Ned Beatty going, ‘There is no Soviet Union. There is no China. There is only Exxon and AT&T.’ It is such a brilliant speech. Everything Paddy Chayefsky wrote about in that movie came true. It was supposed to be a joke! I screened that movie for a bunch of young people, and told them it was a comedy and they said, ‘We love the movie, but it’s not a comedy!’ The idea when he wrote it, that the anchorman could be the entertainer, was impossible. You couldn’t imagine it. ‘I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore’ — how far is that from Trump? It’s crazy.”

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM — DAY

Arthur Jensen (Ned Beatty) escorts Howard Beale (Peter Finch), the newsman whose prophetic on-air rantings initially garnered huge ratings, but which have now put the wrong kind of noses out of joint, into a huge conference room. In the middle, a giant table bedecked with green-domed lights.

JENSEN: Valhalla, Mr Beale! Please, sit down.

Howard sits down at one end of the table as Jensen crosses to the window and closes the curtains. He walks back to the

head of the table, steps into the light, then suddenly launches into an impassioned tirade, gesticulating wildly as he does so.

JENSEN: You have meddled with the primal forces of nature, Mr Beale, and I won’t have it, is that clear? You think you have merely stopped a business deal — that is not the case! The Arabs have taken billions of dollars out of this country, and now they must put it back. It is ebb and flow, tidal gravity, it is ecological balance! You are an old man who thinks in terms of nations and peoples. There are no nations! There are no peoples! There are no Russians, there are no Arabs, there are no Third Worlds, there is no West! There is only one holistic system of systems, one vast and immane, interwoven, interacting, multi-variate, multi-national dominion of dollars. Petro-dollars, electro-dollars, multi-dollars! Reichmarks, rins, rubles, pounds and shekels! It is the international system of currency which determines the totality of life on this planet! That is the natural order of things today! That is the atomic and subatomic and galactic structure of things today! And you have meddled

with the primal forces of nature, and you will atone!

And, again, Jensen flips a switch and starts speaking more conversationally.

JENSEN: Am I getting through to you, Mr Beale?

Howard has been watching, enrapt.

JENSEN: You get up on your little 21” screen and howl about America and democracy. There is no America. There is no democracy. There is only IBM and ITT and AT&T and DuPont, Dow, Union Carbide, and Exxon. Those are the nations of the world today. What do you think the Russians talk about in their councils of state — Karl Marx? They get out their linear programming charts, statistical decision theories, minimax solutions and compute the price-cost probabilities of their transactions and investments, just like we do. We no longer live in a world of nations and ideologies, Mr Beale. The world is a college of corporations, inexorably determined by the immutable by-laws of business. The world is a business, Mr Beale! It has been since man

crawled out of the slime, and our children will live, Mr Beale, to see that perfect world in which there’s no war or famine, oppression or brutality...

Jensen slowly walks toward’s Howard’s chair.

JENSEN: ... one vast and ecumenical holding company, for whom all men will work to serve a common profit, in which all men will hold a share of stock, all necessities provided, all anxieties tranquillised, all boredom amused.

He is now shrouded in darkness.

JENSEN: And I have chosen you, Mr Beale, to preach this evangel.

BEALE: Why me?

JENSEN: Because you’re on television, dummy. Sixty million people watch you every night of the week, Monday through Friday.

BEALE: I have seen the face of God!

JENSEN: You just might be right, Mr Beale.

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